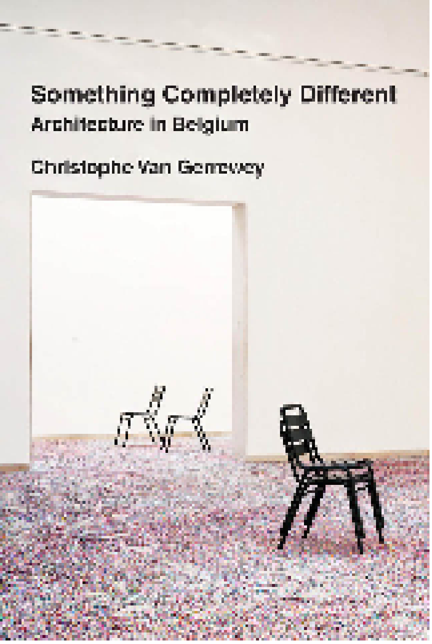

Something Completely Different

Architecture in Belgium

Christophe Van Gerrewey

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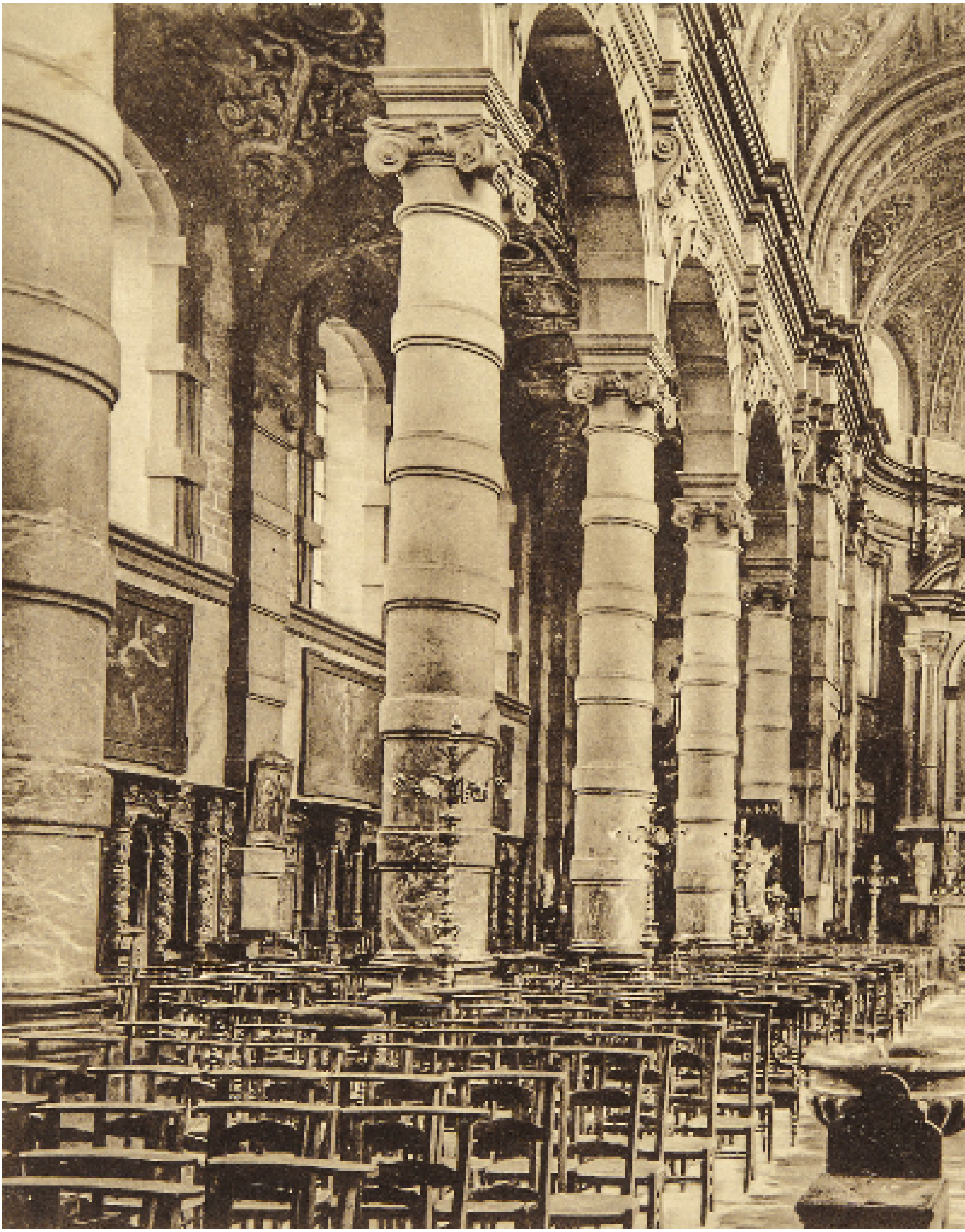
1 The Balance of Rivalries

Belgium—a country, founded in 1830, that Charles Baudelaire wanted to tackle in a book, but he managed to realize only a set of fragments and a pitch for an editor. At the end of his life, in 1864, Baudelaire had fled his creditors in Paris and had boarded the train to Brussels, where he ended up staying for more than two years. He hated Belgium. He gave a few lectures on art criticism in Brussels; according to one account, he "read and stammered and trembled, his teeth chattering, his nose buried in his manuscript."1 Both his solitude and syphilis aggravated him. He collected newspaper clippings to document the stupidity of the country and the city he was staying in, and vented his rage in aphorisms, sneers, and lists of blame and ridicule— methodological preparations for a pamphlet he wanted to write one day against France as well, a project that in the end came to even less. Baudelaire considered Belgium as a fake and farcical version of his native country, but also as a mirror in which he recognized his personal hopelessness as "an agent of the secret discontent of his class with its own hegemony," in the words of Walter Benjamin.2 Ultimately, Belgium became an allegory for a modern world that seemed enlightened and liberal, but that was dominated by gregariousness, pursuit of profit, and mental rigidity.

About Belgian buildings, Baudelaire was to the point: "Modern urban architecture. Junk. Ricketiness of the houses. No harmony.



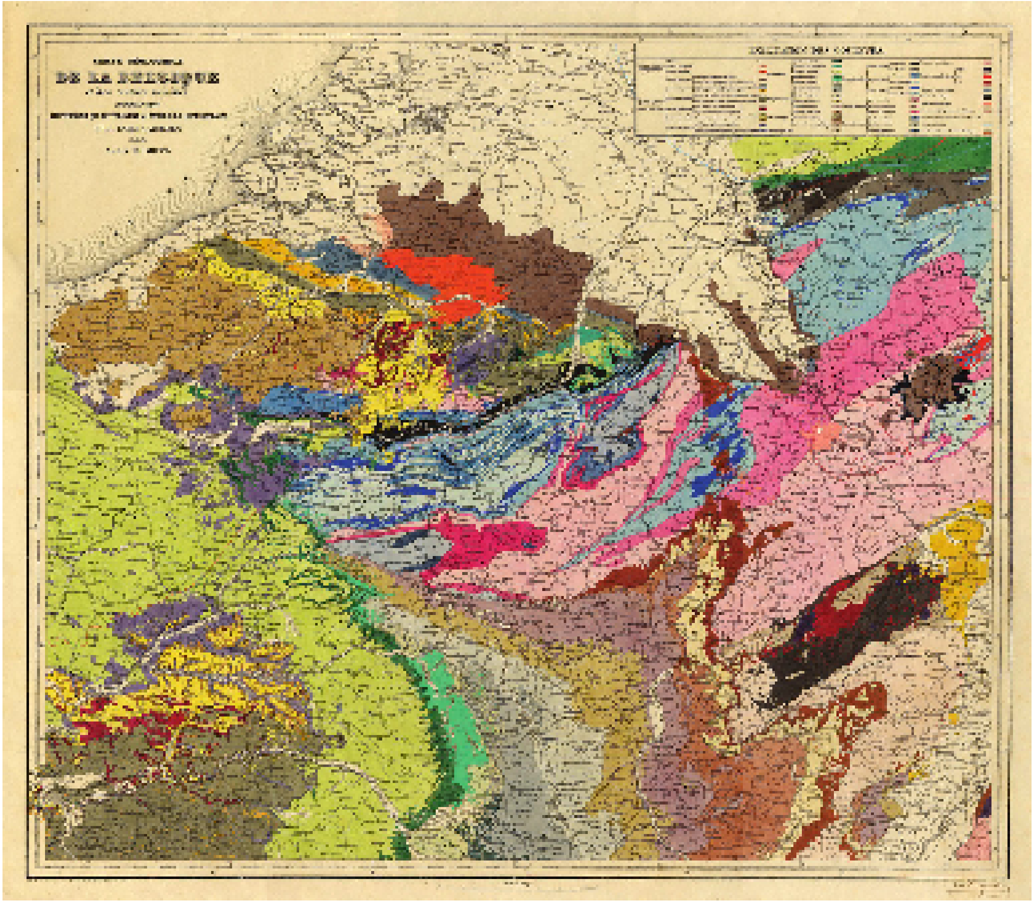
Église Saint-Loup, Namur, date unknown, interior. KU Leuven Libraries, Special Collection.

Clashing architectures.— Good materials.— Blue stone.— Pastiches of the past.— The monuments are counterfeits of France.”[3] *What did arouse his enthusiasm, in line with his predilection for the terrific, the outre, and the contradictory, was “the Jesuit style” of some rococo churches from the seventeenth century, which he considered a “style with genius . . . complex and ambiguous. . . . (Stylish yet terrifying.)”*[4] *Visiting the Église Saint- Loup in Namur in 1866— a Jesuit church from 1645, with a vault of white sandstone embellished with carved cartouches, and with ringed columns of black and red marble, seemingly rotating like corkscrews or pistons— he had a stroke from which he never really recovered, dying one year later.*

Notwithstanding his monomaniac anger, Baudelaire did have an eye for the political raison d’être of Belgium in nineteenth-century Europe, as a construction forged by mightier empires, and subsequently praised for its progressive constitution. While he was sketching out the project with working titles such as The True Belgium, Belgium in the Raw, Belgium Disrobed, or (focusing on Brussels) Capital of Apes, Leopold I, the first king of the Belgians but also the uncle of Queen Victoria, died at the end of 1865. He had been monarch since 1831 of a nation that had come into being one year before, when the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, created in 1815 as a buffer state between France, Prussia, and the United Kingdom, split into a northern and southern part. “Belgium is safeguarded,” Baudelaire wrote insightfully, “by the balance of rivalries.”[5] *It is a country whose existence was willed by other, bigger nations, because they didn’t grant each other this small piece of land, while most of the local population didn’t muster much enthusiasm for any kind of national project. The European rulers, following the disappearance of Napoleon Bonaparte, couldn’t agree on what to do with the area of about 30,000 square kilometers in between the North Sea, France, the Netherlands, and Germany, and so it seemed a good idea to make it independent, even though it consisted of two very different regions. As the American historian George Armstrong Kelly has suggested, it was the French Revolution of 1789 and the subsequent Napoleonic occupation of what would later become Belgium that “altered this territory indelibly.” “For reasons related to language, literacy, temperament, occupation, and circumstance,” Kelly argues, northern Flanders didn’t modernize or secularize to the extent that southern Wallonia did; the former region remained predominantly Catholic,* while the latter was already more liberal in 1830.6 The result, again according to Baudelaire: “There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a Belgian people. There are the Flemish and Walloon races, and there are towns that are enemies of each other.”7

The consequences reach far. A language border divides the country into two parts: a region where Dutch is spoken, and a region where French is the official language. Brussels, in the center, is the capital; today, more than a hundred nationalities live together there, but it cannot literally be called a metropolis— like a child rather than a mother, it is highly dependent on the rest of the country, rather than the other way around. To complicate things, in eastern Belgium, bordering Germany, Netherlands, and Luxembourg, and with a population of less than 1 percent of the national total, German is spoken— the third official language. The linguistic divisions parallel economic differences, which are linked to territorial and geological divisions. North of Brussels, the Belgian soil consists of clay, sand, and loam, composing an almost entirely flat landscape; the southern part— with some significant height differences, although Belgium’s highest point is located at a meager 694 meters above sea level— has a soil made up of stones and sedimentations from the Paleozoic.

In the southern region, carbon has been extracted since Roman times.8 A decade and a half before the foundation of the country, the English- born industrialist John Cockerill started a factory in the middle of the coal basin of Liège. By 1840, sixteen steam engines continuously produced power for an immense iron foundry, employing more than three thousand workers. Following Britain, Belgium was the second country in the world to undergo a rapid industrial revolution, but most of the extraction and the production took place in Wallonia. Flanders, meanwhile, remained a poor, rural, and agricultural region, where crops— mostly grain and potatoes— were grown in soil that could hardly be called fertile, and in a very temperate climate. Conditions for farmers were precarious, and hundreds of thousands of impoverished cottagers had to flee from Flanders to Wallonia to secure a livelihood, as for example, when advancing industrialization led to the disappearance of the artisan production of textile (cotton or flax). The result was a country founded on inequality— “the snug, well- hedged, little paradise of the Landlord, the capitalist and the priest,”9 as Marx described Belgium in 1869, in response to the violent crackdown on a metal workers’ strike, resulting in several deaths.

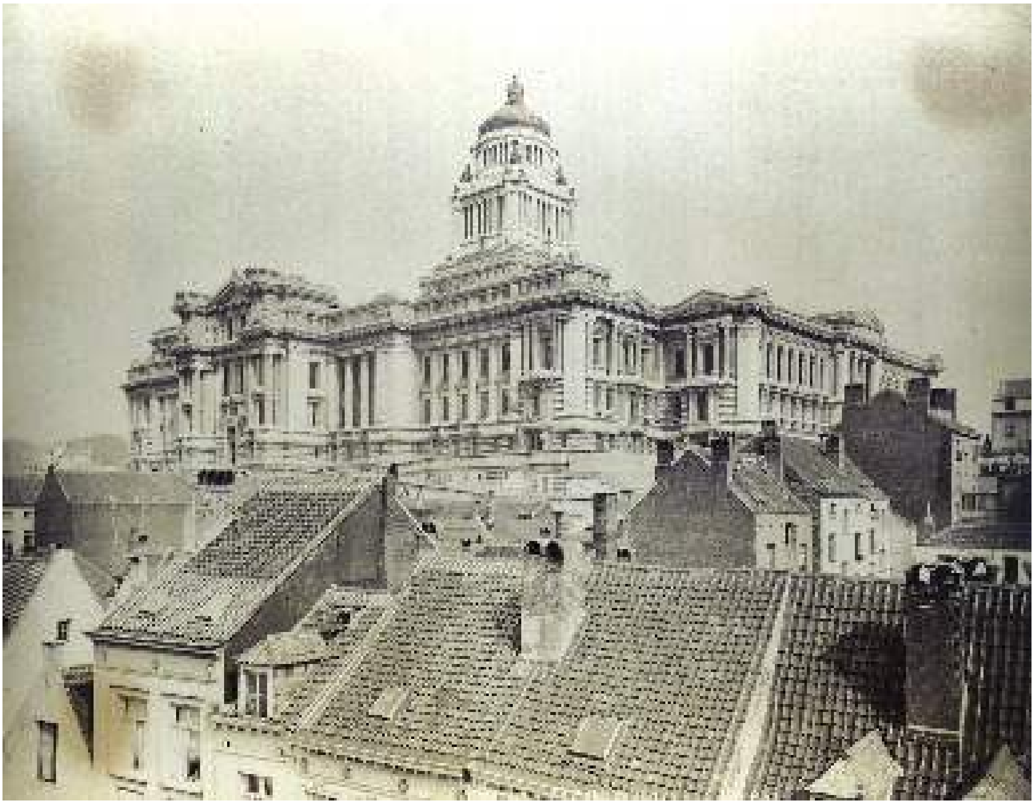


André Hubert Dumont, Carte géologique de la Belgique et des contrées voisines representant les terrains qui se trouvent au dessous du limon hesbayen et du sable campinien, 1853. Library Université de Liège.

Baudelaire witnessed the demise of King Leopold I, but also the enthronement of his eldest son, Leopold II. Both kings ruthlessly employed architecture and urban planning to radiate or arouse nationalistic sentiments—to provide irrefutable evidence that Belgium existed, and not just because others wanted it to. The most wellknown and colossal example is the Palace of Justice in Brussels, begun in 1860 under the reign of Leopold I, required by the first generation of the Belgian bourgeoisie in Brussels, and designed as an eclectic and endlessly proliferating edifice by Joseph Poelaert. He was despised by the displaced residents, forced to make way for this labyrinth with a ground surface of almost 300,000 square feet— considered, during the nineteenth century, as the largest building in the world, and a monument to justice and fairness, as well as to a young country proud of its modern legislation.

It is no coincidence that this palace is visited and discussed in the opening chapter of Austerlitz, W. G. Sebald's novel from 2001 on the lasting monstrosity, and the fallout, of mankind's ambitions. The Palace of Justice was inaugurated by Leopold II in 1883, who was busy developing other projects and plans, no less extreme, but in different ways. He had become king in 1865, making "his entry," as a surprised Baudelaire wrote, "to the tune of an Offenbach air (factual)." Given the oeuvre of this French composer, the piece of music was probably an operetta whose irony eluded both the king and his population— "nobody laughs," Baudelaire jotted down.[10] Leopold II reigned for forty- four years until his death in 1909, and of all the heads of state, he left the most visible mark on Belgium— and, unfortunately, by no means on Belgium alone. The editorial team of L'Émulation, the most important Belgian architecture journal at the time, commemorated the king at the start of 1910 as le bâtisseur, "the builder," and praised his rather un- Belgian ambition, as well as his efforts to construct monumental avenues and infrastructural axes in all the major cities, such as Ostend, Namur, Liège, Ghent, Antwerp, and Brussels:

> The scope of the royal conceptions has certainly more than once disturbed the timidity of enterprise which formed more or less the basis of our national temperament, but joined to the proud energy of the Sovereign, it ends up getting the better of this lack of confidence that we had in ourselves, and for matters pertaining to the urban road

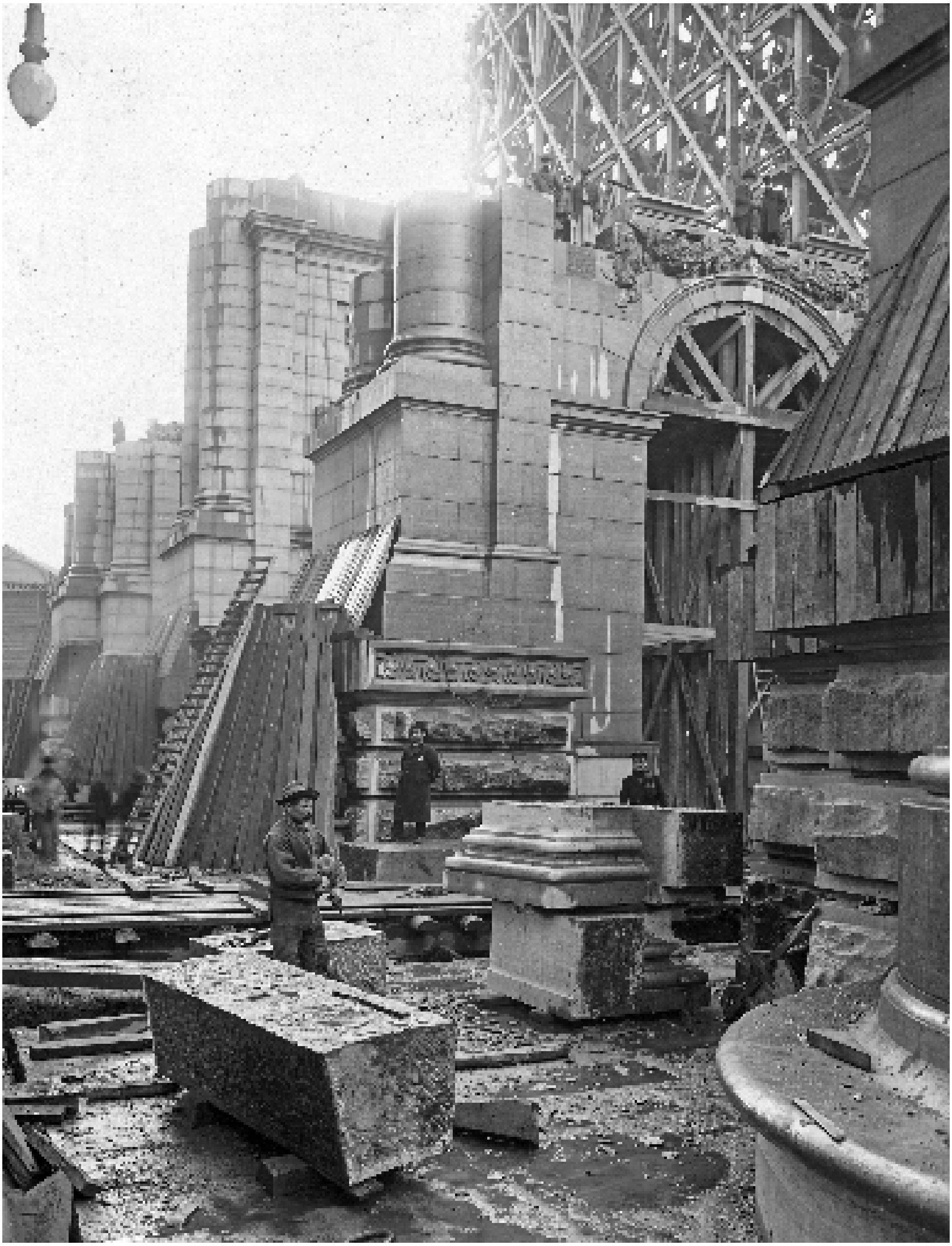


Joseph Poelaert, Palace of Justice, Brussels, end of nineteenth century.
Ghent University Library.

> as well as to many other things, we owe him a lot and are extremely grateful for the present and for the future. These wide, beautiful and useful arteries, Leopold II did not trace them by simple virtuosity, as a motorist who likes to traverse the main roads at high speed might have done; he wanted them from the start to be cheerful and alive, and therefore he sowed not only flowers but also attracted an audience: here with a hippodrome, there with a sports club or a casino, just as he planted more pompous monuments (palaces) or more original ones: towers and Japanese restaurants, even Chinese ones, that demand attention, become the vogue, and achieve success. A number of projects which he dreamt of realizing . . . remain unfinished. Shouldn't the Palace of Justice in Brussels have been, or be, surrounded by squares and buildings more decent than the current hovels? Shouldn't a Walhalla rise in Brussels, close to the Porte de Namur or in front of the Grand Place, where a great hotel or a theater could assure animation? Shouldn't our museums be considerably enlarged?[11]

Eagerly looking forward to commissions, the architects of L'Émulation hoped that Leopold II's successor, his nephew King Albert I, would continue to build. The only point of criticism was that the recently deceased ruler had chosen to appoint a French architect, Charles Girault, but the editors were too collegial to mention his name. Girault designed many of the king's prestigious projects, such as the Museum of the Belgian Congo in Tervuren, the Royal Galleries of Ostend, and the Cinquantenaire Arcade in Brussels, commissioned to commemorate Belgium's fiftieth birthday, but completed twenty-five years late. This triumphal monument—framing a dramatic sightline to the Museum in Tervuren, almost ten kilometers away—consists of three round arches of the same size, built in freestone on concrete foundations. A previous, half-executed project was dynamited in 1904 (the first time this explosive was used on a Belgian construction site); to get the city gate ready before the country's seventy-fifth birthday, 450 workers had to toil day and night.

Enormous wooden scaffoldings were constructed, and an electrical generator provided artificial light.[12] The project once more shows—just like the preference for Offenbach as the soundtrack of his inauguration—Leopold II's obstinate desire to reenact the



Arcades du Cinquantenaire, with architect Charles Girault (middle), Brussels, 1905.
Archives Royal Museum for Central Africa, Brussels.

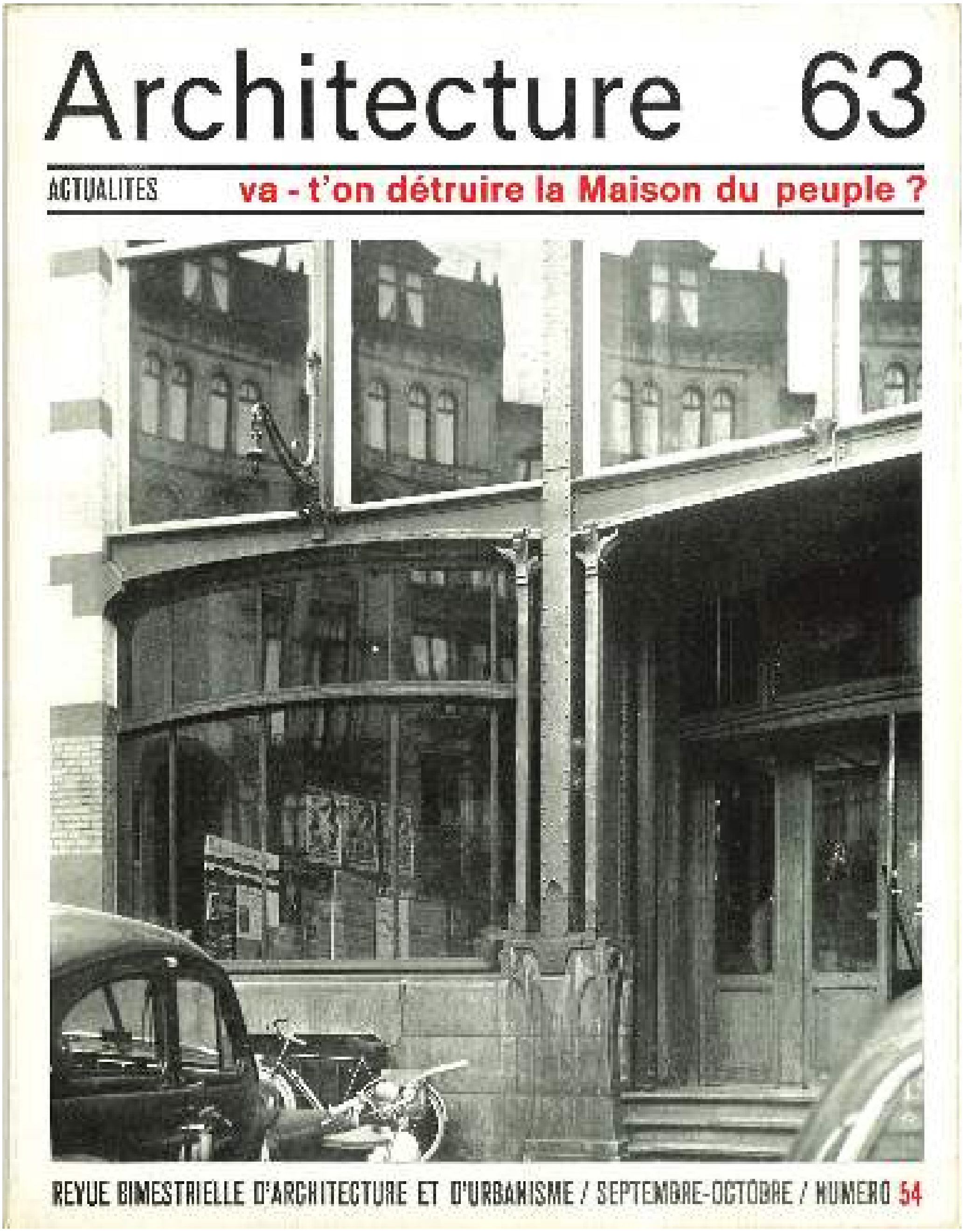
Second French Empire on Belgian soil, with the king acting as both Haussmann and Napoleon III, using architecture to create, or at least to simulate, national pride.

Most of the money for all this nation building came from abroad— from the so- called Congo Free State, "the huge territory in central Africa that is the world's only colony claimed by one man," as Adam Hochschild wrote in his 1998 book King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa, which opened the eyes of the Western world to the fact that "the Congo of a century ago had . . . seen a death toll of Holocaust dimensions."13 Leopold II was able to lay his hands on Congo following the Berlin Conference of 1885, at which— once again— the balance of rivalries was decisive. Because Otto von Bismarck wanted, under no circumstances, to leave a large part of Africa to France, England, or Portugal, it was Belgium that could count itself lucky, provided, of course, that freedom of trade for the other European countries was guaranteed. And so it happened that Leopold II obtained a colony occupying one- thirteenth of the African continent, and more than seventy- six times the size of Belgium itself. Although the king never visited the Congo, it remained his own private project: the Belgian government was not involved, but the national economy could take advantage of the African province and its natural resources, while the mistreatment, exploitation, and slaughter of the local population remained under the radar. It required fierce foreign criticism to change that, and in 1908 the king was "forced" to sell "his" colony to the country whose cities he had tried to equip with bourgeois monuments and roads.

"I will give them my Congo, but they have no right to know what I did there," the king is reported to have said shortly before having most of his archives burned.14 This action is one of the reasons it remains difficult to establish with certainty the exact influence of the colony on the Belgian economy at the time— and therefore also on the architecture in the country. Most of the national industry and trade was, of course, linked to what was happening in Congo. The very few buildings that give Belgium a prominent place in classic books on the history of Western architecture were conceived by architects like Victor Horta or Henry Van de Velde and were commissioned by the political and financial elite living in Brussels at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Horta's Hôtel van Eetvelde, for example, was designed for Edmond van Eetvelde, the administrator of the

Congo Free State, and in many ways the most important henchman of Leopold II; Hôtel Solvay, completed in 1900, was commissioned by the heir of a family of chemists whose enterprise was active in Congo too, while Horta used, for its interior, twenty-three different kinds of wood and twelve kinds of marble, many of them shipped by boat from the colony to the port of Antwerp. The result was an expensive and celebratory architecture, in which the interplay between steel, wood, glass, and stone provided the difficult, often dark, and mostly formulaic genre of the terraced house— so typical of Belgian cities— with light, decoration, and a darkly romantic sophistication. "All historians agree," Leonardo Benevolo wrote in 1960 with slight hyperbole, "that the European movement for the renewal of the applied arts originated in Belgium, between 1892 and 1894, and was born ex abrupto with Horta's Tassel house in Brussels."15 What more recent historians do not agree upon is where this innovative architecture came from, what it expressed, and why these Belgian architects felt the need to design and renew those buildings in precisely this way, just before and after the turn of the century. It has been argued that "Horta's work epitomizes the construction of the social through the extension of the domestic horizon to the public realm."16 He not only aestheticized almost everything that took place inside of a house, but he also gave those interiors a theatrical and even spectacular character that one would expect in public buildings. In his Maison du Peuple, commissioned by the Belgian Workers' Party, completed in 1899 and destroyed, unlikely enough, in 1965, Horta more or less tried to do the opposite, by giving large spaces for cooperative activities— shops, a restaurant, a library, an auditorium, and a concert hall— the homely and personal air that the bourgeoisie, no matter how elegantly and well meant, tried to impose on the working class.17

From a point of view that focuses not on local class struggles but rather on a geopolitical subconscious, the art nouveau that Horta and his contemporaries developed has been redefined as an "art of darkness"— a lustful celebration of all the violence that took place, in the same fin- de- siècle period, in Congo, visible in art nouveau motifs such as the whiplash, the vine, and the elephantine.18 If this is true, art nouveau is the most successful attempt to date to develop a Belgian architectural style, albeit as a way of scandalously showcasing the crimes of the colonial empire. Or is this mixture of postcolonial critique and Freudianism an



Architecture 63

ACTUALITES va - t'on détruire la Maison du peuple ?

REVUE BIMESTRIELLE D'ARCHITECTURE ET D'URBANISME / SEPTEMBRE-OCTOBRE / NUMERO 54

Architecture, no. 63 (1963), cover with Victor Horta's Maison du Peuple from 1899.

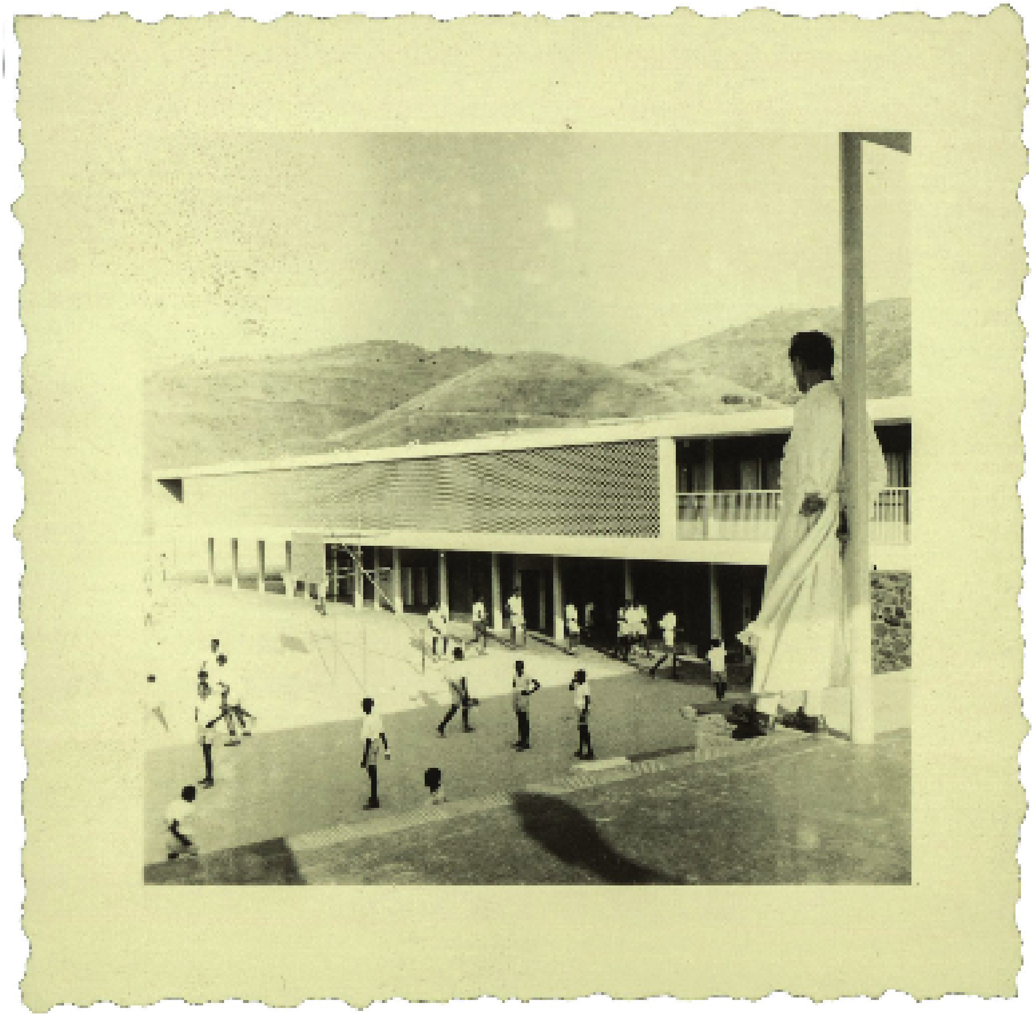
overinterpretation? In the end, art nouveau was not necessarily a highly original way of conceiving buildings and interiors in one country, heavily influenced— on a formal level— as it was by both foreign painting (through the graphic work of Dutch- Indonesian artist Jan Toorop, for example) and architecture (through the theorizations on structural honesty and decoration by French architect Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le- Duc).

Extraction from colonial soil contributed to the development of architecture in Belgium, but it was never an ambition of Leopold II, who died in 1909, to erect buildings in the African country he ruled. That changed once the Belgian state took official control of the colony, which would be known as Belgian Congo from 1908 until 1960. Belgium did build a lot in Africa, especially during the postwar years, when the government launched its first— and last— Ten Year Plan for the Economic and Social Development of the Belgian Congo in 1949. Housing, urban planning, education, and healthcare, as well as transport infrastructure and agricultural development, were focal points, with the aim of introducing a colonial variant of a welfare policy.[19] In 1951, King Baudouin, twenty- one years old, ascended the throne of Belgium, succeeding his uncle Albert I and his father Leopold III; in 1955, he made a triumphant visit to Congo, and the memory of his ancestor from the nineteenth century seemed far away. Meanwhile, modernist architecture— clear, rational, functional, and usually white— was used to "innovate" the colony, but also to show, in a strange mix of guilt, denial, sincerity, and hope, how beneficial the Belgian domination supposedly was or could be for Africa; the postwar ideal was to "recreate" Congo as the "tenth province" of Belgium, from 6,000 kilometers away.

One major example of this Belgian architecture in Africa just before the end of colonial rule has been examined by Johan Lagae: the Collège du Saint-Esprit in Burundi, completed in 1961.[20] Burundi had been a German colony, but during the First World War, it was attacked by British and Belgian colonial forces— and thus by an army of inhabitants of Congo, controlled by Belgian commanders. In the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, it was decided that Burundi, and its neighboring country Rwanda, would together become a United Nations Trust Territory, with Belgium as administering power, implying an extension of the country's colonial empire. The Collège du Saint-Esprit was created in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, located along Lake Tanganyika, as a collaboration between colonial officials, Jesuits, and the White Fathers, the Catholic Missionaries of Africa. The Belgium government insisted that the school, in which the future elite of central Africa was to be trained, would be interracial, educating European and African students, but also Asians and Muslims. Some settlers felt threatened by the initiative, but the project continued, overseen by the United Nations. Its scale was enormous, despite the difficult and isolated site atop a truncated hill: 420 bedrooms, divided among two blocs; a building of thirty classrooms; three study halls with 200 seats; a semipublic library; a science building; six refectories for a hundred people each; and a chapel with a bell tower, strategically positioned in the center.

The architect was Roger Bastin, who built, in Belgium, some churches, a handful of educational buildings, and many private houses. Bastin's approach was careful, modest, and down-to-earth. In 1970, he admitted that he had remained faithful to the dictum from 1922 of his teacher Victor Bourgeois, the only Belgian architect to participate in the 1927 Weissenhof exhibition in Stuttgart that displayed modernist housing principles: "Being flat broke is the salvation of architecture."21 It only seems to contradict what the United Nations accused Belgium of in 1957 following a visit to Burundi: "thinking in too grandiose terms and constructing too luxurious buildings."22 The Collège du Saint-Esprit epitomizes modernist architecture after the Second World War, when the social ideas theorized after the First World War (and motivated by both economic poverty and intellectual restraint) had turned into academic formalisms, backed by— and in the service of— national capital, literally and symbolically. It does not detract from the pedagogical commitment of the school or the way in which Bastin diligently orchestrated the Jesuit regime of surveillance by means of open galleries and see-throughs, which at the same time generously frame views of the surrounding landscape.

The architecture was both international and contextual, but only because the climate was a determining factor, much more so than the other, local culture. The same can be said about the institutional program, which was aimed at instilling Western (and Catholic) values. Bastin himself would not have opposed that interpretation: "I answer," he said in 1970, and not without fatalistic undertones, "like all architects, with my own means, to more or less opportune requests, more or less well formulated by anyone who has the power to build."23

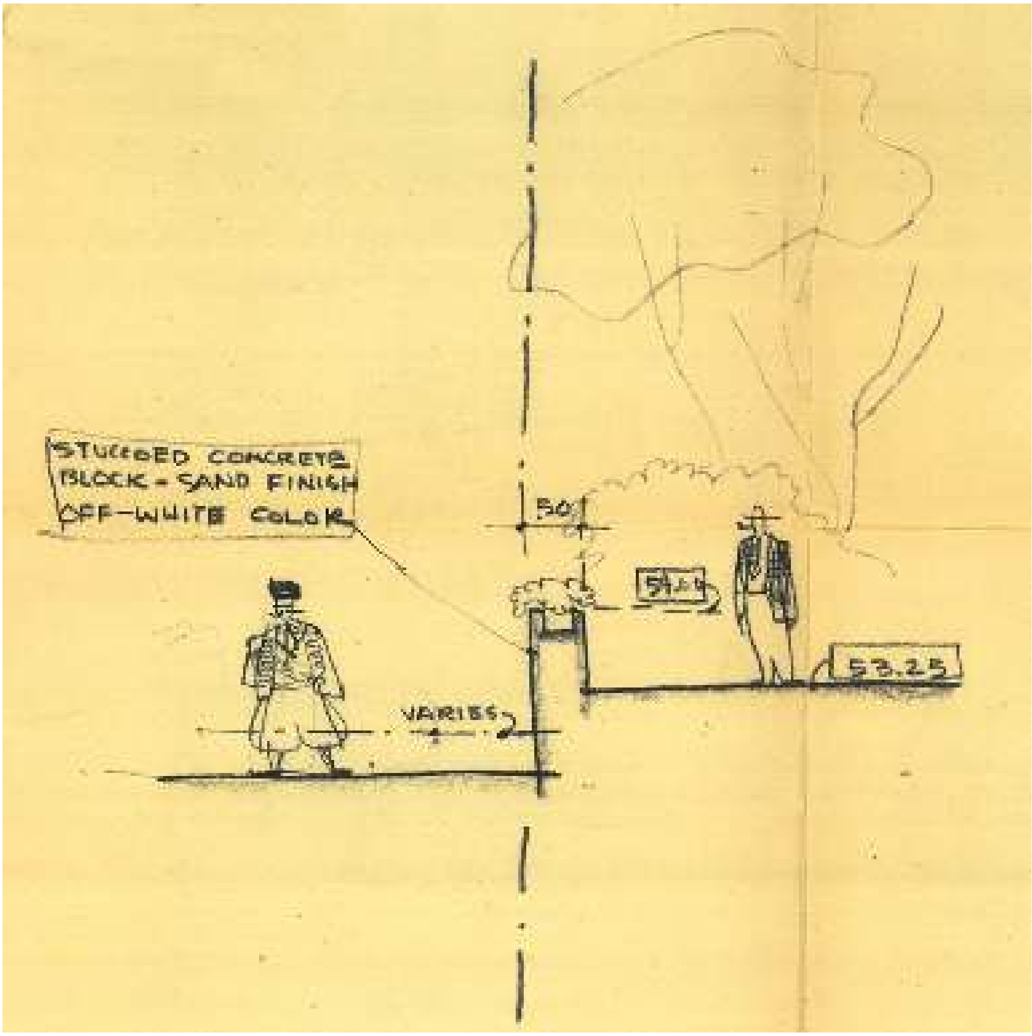


Roger Bastin, Collège du Saint-Esprit, Bujumbura, 1960. Bastin Family, sOFAM, Brussels.

A power shift occurred, or at least was announced, when the Collège du Saint- Esprit was in the state of being completed. On June 30, 1960, the Republic of Congo achieved independence, and Burundi did the same two years later. Belgium remained involved for decades, often with the United States and the United Nations, in Congolese and African politics, sometimes through violent intervention (as in the 1961 murder of Patrice Lumumba, who was considered too left- wing and headstrong, and a threat to the continuing economic interests of the West), sometimes due to negligence (as in the total inaction facing the Rwandan genocide of 1994). But the loss of the colony also had immediate major consequences for Belgium itself. While the raw materials looted in Africa have without a doubt made Belgium richer, some suggest that its economy was not diverse, dynamic, and international enough to remain competitive in a postcolonial era. "The question of how Belgian capitalism might have evolved had its resources not been diverted so massively to Congo" remains a point of contention among historians and economists.[24] Moreover, the Congo had always been a unifying factor in an internally divided country— the supposed tenth province, overseas, was always something that, if only in theory, all Belgians shared and profited from, in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels.

These problems, and many more, were already present, though mostly below the surface, at Expo 58 in Brussels—the first major world's fair after the Second World War to be registered under the Bureau International des Expositions. Since 1830, the official architecture of Belgium had been used to show, not least to its own citizens, that the country had a right to exist and could compete with other countries, often resulting in imitation of French models, in exaggeration, and in misplaced grandeur. Likewise, many of the pavilions at Expo 58, both national and international, were expected to express unequivocal self- confidence, optimism, and a total belief in progress. The Atomium epitomizes that feeling most clearly, and to this day; it was for the world's fair what the Eiffel Tower was to the 1889 edition in Paris, although it lacks the latter's character as "pure sign" and "unbridled metaphor" that Roland Barthes celebrated.[25] Designed to last six months, the Atomium's destruction was postponed year after year until the gadgety object became indispensable as a national monument, as well as a tourist attraction, and from 2004 to 2006 it was completely renovated. With a height of 102 meters, consisting of nine *stainless- steel- clad spheres with a diameter of 18 meters, it represents an iron crystal, magnified 165 billion times. Sybil Moholy-Nagy criticized the Atomium as “meaningless as a giant child’s rattle— clumsy, hollow, and pathetically unrelated to the visible forces that might well be the end of all of us.”26 The shiny building did showcase Belgium’s past as a country with an important steel industry, but it also emphasized the country’s blind faith in the power of nuclear energy to make visible (by means of X- rays and crystallography) what the human eye isn’t able to perceive, as well as to ensure a stable geopolitical system in the West, thanks to a continuous flow of resources from the colonies. One initial idea, shelved for obvious reasons, was to build a small nuclear reactor at the site of the expo, with the assistance of the United States, which would have preceded Belgium’s first nuclear plant by more than fifteen years. It is not known whether André Waterkeyn, the engineer who proposed and designed the Atomium, knew that the uranium used to produce the atom bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was extracted in Congo and delivered to the United States via Belgium.27*

Expo 58— with the official motto “For a better, more humane and more united world”— was an invocation ritual to silence the past and to influence the future. Several crises, finished, ongoing, or expected, were concealed: the tensions and the differences between the Belgian regions; the ongoing inequality and oppression in the Congo, whose independence only two years later came as a surprise for many Belgians; and the transformation of the country in a postindustrial economy. But the same goes for all the participating nations, and for the world at the end of the 1950s. The memory of the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust was still fresh; technology, and the role it could play in ordinary lives, remained exciting but frightening too; the values of consumerism were no longer the same as those of a society in which religion played a dominant role; and the rivalry of the Cold War— based on that almost unfathomable difference between socialism and capitalism— could spiral out of control at any moment. Historian Rika Devos has excavated from the archives a sketch that captures this atmosphere. The sketch— half section, half caricature, loosely drawn by hand by Edward Durell Stone, one of the architects in 1939 of the Museum of Modern Art in New York— is a technical drawing of the American pavilion, detailing the border of its back garden with the adjacent Soviet pavilion.



STUCCOED CONCRETE BLOCK - SAND FINISH OFF-WHITE COLOR
50
VARIES
53.25

Edward Durell Stone, UsA Pavilion, Expo 58, Brussels, plan (detail). National Archives of Belgium, Brussels.

Two figurines indicate the scale and, in a sense, the entire setup of this world exhibition. A difference in height seems to guarantee that the American man—smoking a pipe and wearing a tie and a hat— literally looks down on the Russian visitor in traditional costume and with a gigantic mustache. It's as if Stone anticipated, with the depiction of that confident chap, the position of the anonymous correspondent of the American journal Architectural Record, who considered the pavilion of his country "the handsomest building at the Fair," sticking to an ideological reading (or reckoning): "By day and night . . . it is— and proclaims, in contrast to the great closed-in Soviet rectangle across the way— an architecture of light, strength and freedom."28 Inside, a 360- degree movie displayed the American nation in all its glory, with the visitor right in the middle.

It's possible—and this might apply to any world's fair, at any moment in history— that all those political and ideological presuppositions and implications made it impossible for Expo 58 to be significant for architecture as a discipline. How much can buildings mean, especially for those who made them, when they are used as a mass medium for spreading propaganda by applauding machines, progress, and inventions? Sybil Moholy-Nagy gave a clear answer in her review: "No— technology as content has nothing to offer."29 Nevertheless, the desire to define a new and truly human humanism, after the traditional one had culminated in violence, war, and destruction, was not unique to Expo 58. Two years earlier, the French historian Pierre Francastel had published his influential book Art et technique au XIXe et XXe siècles, part of a postwar series entitled L'homme et la machine. Francastel argued that there wasn't, or shouldn't be, a fundamental difference between art, architecture, and technology. As human, creative pursuits, they feed on each other, and can help to make the world habitable. "Tomorrow, like today," he wrote in 1956, "a new humanism will come about only through a more lucid understanding not of abstract and immortal man but of the ephemeral beings of flesh and blood that we are. It is up to us to gain insight into ourselves by addressing one of the most fascinating endeavors down the ages."30 The endeavor to rediscover the benign qualities of human creation occupied a central position at the world's fair in Brussels. It got mixed up, however, with what Francastel didn't take into consideration: politics and power play, or nationalism and capitalism.

Little wonder that many architects didn’t like what they saw at Expo 58, which was mostly a form of technology in the service of unambiguous communication and persuasion. The Belgian section of CIAM dismissed the world’s fair, months before it opened, as a “big fiasco in the field of architecture.”[31] André Jacqmain, the architect who designed the interior of the International Palace of Science, published a fictional dialogue à trois to express his disappointment: “I just came back from the Expo. Man, it’s horrifying.” About the German pavilion by Egon Eiermann and Sep Ruf, transparent in both the literal and phenomenal sense, he wrote: “It shows nothing new, it’s really the end of a school. . . . After all the fuss about the Expo, I would at least have thought to see a few new, interesting, meaningful things.”[32] It is true that newness was in many pavilions solely expressed by means of structural invention. “What does unite the architects of Brussels,” Architectural Record wrote, “is their common fascination with structural pyrotechnics: structure as architecture.”[33] In the British Architectural Review, J. M. Richards noticed “a tendency among contemporary architects to over-indulge in structural acrobatics. . . . Apart from these, the predominance of the glass-box-curtain-wall theme suggests that Brussels is not one of those exhibitions to which history will look back as the starting point of some new stylistic trend or as the occasion of important experiments.”[34]

Expo 58, visited by 41 million people, was a tremendous success, and for many it would have been their first acquaintance with modern architecture. But only a few architects, Belgian or otherwise, have confessed to having been profoundly influenced by what they saw. Willem Jan Neutelings, who worked for OMA/Rem Koolhaas during the 1980s, claims to have been conceived during Expo 58. In a lecture from 2006, he showed a picture of his parents, with the balls of the Atomium in the background, like the instruments of an overambitious juggler. Neutelings polemically presented its architecture as the unjustly forgotten start of a counterhistory of Belgian architecture, which became, in his view, all too minimalist since: “A volcano of cheerful expression, which opened alluring vistas. An orgy of lustful forms. Spheres, hyperscales, arrows, triangles, curved trusses, and wavy plywood. Pavilions that resembled huge buttocks, phalluses, and vaginas. Cheerful embellishments and decorations, floral patterns and vibrant colors.”[35] Part of an older generation is Juliaan Lampens, whose work has reemerged in the past decades due to the nostalgia for brutalism. He admitted *in an interview in 2010 with Hans Ulrich Obrist that he could only start realizing his "radical buildings" immediately after the world expo. Before, "clients were very reluctant" and "there was no trust," so he had felt obliged to build traditional houses in a neo- Gothic style. The "structural pyrotechnics" of Expo 58 showed Lampens, and most of all his clients, that extremities were possible in architecture, and a sculptural approach thanks to the plasticity of reinforced concrete became not only acceptable but— for some— desirable. With slight exaggeration, it's possible to say that the detached houses that Lampens built in the following decades are variations on the so- called Arrow of Civil Engineering at Expo 58— a concrete cantilever, designed by architect- sculptor Jacques Moeschal, eighty meters long, with a section like an inverted A, spectacularly symbolizing the victory of manmade construction over nature and gravity.*

The showy emphasis on obvious significance, as well as on visual bravado and color, turns Expo 58, in hindsight, into an early manifestation of all the attempts, a decade later, to escape the rigidity of functionalism. At the same time, the truly innovative— or critical and polemical—architecture that challenged the clichés of the discipline was to be found in a few exceptions, such as the Italian pavilion designed by a supergroup consisting of Adolfo De Carlo, Ignazio Gardella, Enrico Peressutti, Giuseppe Perugini, Ludovico Quaroni, and Ernesto Nathan Rogers: a collection of small, modest buildings in brick, built against a slope, and connected by open squares and alleys. Amid "the unfortunate parade of abstract symbologies," as Manfredo Tafuri wrote in 1964, their contribution to Expo 58 was "a composition of spaces on a human scale, made with traditional materials and semi- artisanal techniques."36 Here, one could argue, the ambition of the world expo to strive for a more "humane world" was achieved, although with a certain nostalgia and a lack of worldliness as a price. "Maybe," Rogers admitted shortly after the expo closed, "we have forgotten that the taste of most visitors is by now very spoiled; we should have added a lot more pepper to the salt."37

More significant than Expo 58 for the development of architecture—and certainly of a national architecture culture— was an exhibition organized thirteen years later in 1971, entitled Building in Belgium: 1945– 1970. Together with its catalog (in French and in Dutch), it initiated the birth of contemporary architecture in Belgium as a self- critical activity, no longer unilaterally in the

Bouwen
in België
1945-1970

Geert Bekaert and Francis Strauven, Bouwen in België: 1945– 1970 (Brussels: Nationale Confederatie van het Bouwbedrijf, 1971), cover.

La Construction
en Belgique
1945-1970

Geert Bekaert and Francis Strauven, La Construction en Belgique: 1945– 1970 (Brussels: Confédération Nationale de la Construction, 1971), cover.

service of those in power, but conscious of both its strengths and shortcomings in comparison to other disciplines, and within society at large.

Curiously enough, the reason for the exhibition was also technological or industrial: the twenty- fifth anniversary of the National Confederation of the Building Industry. This employers' organization had been set up in 1945 to defend the interests of Belgian construction companies. The need for new houses and infrastructure was pressing, immediately after the war, but contractors faced fundamental problems: a lack of credit, too little materials, a shortage of trained personnel, while construction costs had increased fivefold since the prewar period. As part of the Marshall Plan (officially the European Recovery Program), enacted in 1948, the United States transferred half a billion dollars to Belgium, and a large part of that money was spent on construction. In 1970, at twenty- five years old, the National Confederation of the Building Industry found itself at a turning point: the 1970s recession and the oil crisis, and thus the end of the postwar economic expansion, was only a few years away, while the construction and housing market in Belgium was gradually becoming saturated. It is therefore both surprising and understandable that for the festivities an architecture critic was recruited as master of ceremonies. The National Confederation had, until that point, never really dealt with architecture; the book published for its twentieth anniversary in 1965 mainly featured highways, bridges, and apartment buildings, attributed to real estate companies whose names were written in big bold letters, while the architects were reduced to small print. That an architect could play an important part in filling up the national territory did not seem to be taken into consideration. The one chapter devoted to architecture in the twentieth- anniversary book quietly gave the impression that Belgian architects were a dying breed, by focusing on some great figures of the past. "It would be a wasted effort," the author of the chapter wrote, "to list buildings, in chronological order, that have been built in Brussels, in Flanders, and Wallonia since 1946: the list would be long and incomplete, and no positive lesson could be drawn from it."38

In 1970, architecture critic Geert Bekaert did make such an inventory.39 He decided to bring to light contrasts inherent to the postwar development of Belgium, by staging a more internal kind of crisis, based on the hitherto undisclosed difference between *building and architecture, and on the seemingly marginal, powerless, or invisible position of the designer. The work of fifty contemporary Belgian architects, born between 1899 and 1941, was shown by means of models, plans, and blown-up images at an exhibition traveling from Brussels to other cities over the course of 1971. Equally important, however, were several slide carousels with photos, taken by Bekaert himself in 1969, of parts of Belgium that had developed during the past decades without the intervention of an architect— images of a newly paved boulevard flanked by shop windows, the asphalt still wetly glimmering; a fenced lawn occupied by all kinds of Tinguely- like steel structures, positioned as if in a densely populated but slightly crazy sculpture park; a gigantic four- arm traffic interchange populated with viaducts, exits, bridges, and hard shoulders; a smoking chimney as the punctum in a patchwork of rear facades of rowhouses, no one house similar to the other; grayish four- story apartment buildings next to a monumental building plinth from the nineteenth century; whitish ten- story apartment buildings preceded by a billboard announcing "Résidence Epiphanie" with twenty-two apartments and eighty parking spaces; an inner street in a historic city, at the left the blind brick facade of a church, and at the right a cafe advertising beer, martini, and Boule d'Or cigarettes; a multicolored garbage dump along the street, without any railing, but with one road sign indicating the maximum speed of 100 kilometers per hour; a gently undulating agricultural landscape sprinkled with wooden posts and with a village agglomeration in the distance; a red- painted gate as the entrance to an allotment garden, preceded by a single discarded sofa hiding under an adjacent wooden shelter; and a shopping street with cars parked along the curb and boasting signboards for, among other things, De Zwaantjes, Shoepost, Torfs, Lido, Priba, Marlon, and a laundromat called Blanche. Bekaert explained his démarche in the catalog:*

> *The starting point is the belief in a fruitful interaction between the two spheres of human activity, an interaction that can come about through an expanded awareness of the social responsibility of both for the whole of the human environment. . . . The exhibition aims to collect material for a reflection on construction activity in the most general sense, with the aim of discovering its significance for our current and future environment. Hence the contradiction*

> *between the given milieu and its architectonic criticism, which must be regarded as the actual contribution of the exhibition. A choice between the two is not made, because there is no choice. The aim is to overcome the contradiction, first and foremost by making the contradiction conscious.40*

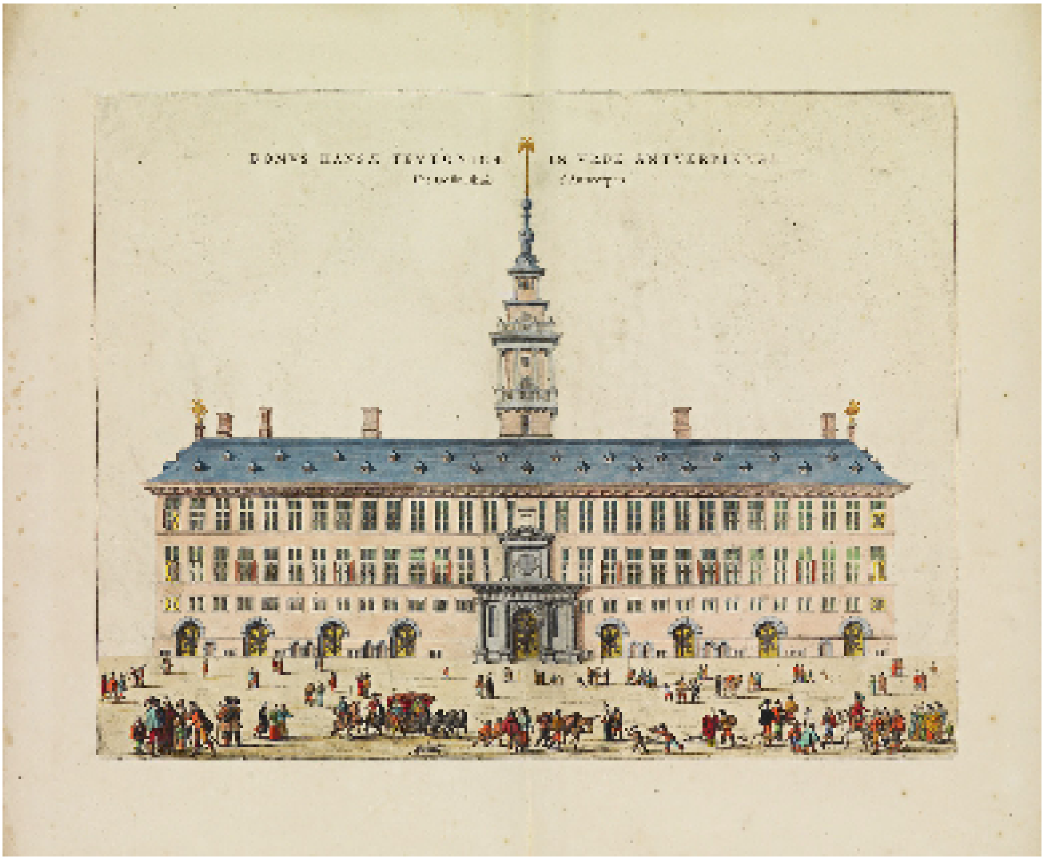
Such a premise was, of course, evidence of a coolly detached Hegelianism: what architecture needed in order to evolve and to grow was to be confronted with its opposite, namely everything that comes about without architects—an opposite which then, in the next phase, proves not to have been so divergent at all. It is this kind of dialectic that relates, but also differentiates, the concept of Building in Belgium to what Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi were doing around the same time in a desert in the United States. In his introduction to the catalog, Bekaert referred to the issue of Architectural Record of March 1968 in which Scott Brown and Venturi's first analysis of the commercial landscape of the Strip had appeared, prior to the publication of their book Learning from Las Vegas in 1972. He even opposed their position, "based on a given landscape, made and inhabited by concrete people," with that of another American, Philip Johnson, who was accused of defining "the role of the architect exclusively in terms of the creation of abstract spatial forms."41 It is true that Bekaert wanted to confront architects, often still working in a faded, academic modernist tradition, with what had been going on outside of their offices, their canons, and their professional clubs. But unlike the design studios, the field work, and the articles by Scott Brown and Venturi, the exhibition in 1971 was commissioned by a professional association of building contractors. The polemic was, therefore, double: the eyes that were charged with not seeing were those of architects but also of engineers, developers, and patrons of industry. What was equally questioned, and most fundamentally so, was how both parties were perceived by society at large— as sectors not only separate from each other, but also isolated from, or at least misunderstood by, the outside world. One final difference, and perhaps the most crucial one, was that Building in Belgium wasn't made by an architect: the outcome of the projected balance of rivalries between architecture and construction, on the one hand, and architecture and society, on the other hand, wasn't predicted, prefigured, or sketched. Good recent buildings were, of course, selected at the exhibition and commented upon in the catalog, but there wasn't one single denominator, style, or approach they could be grouped under. Unlike the retroactive manifesto by Scott Brown and Venturi for a popular, "kickable," and legible architecture to come, this exercise was more theoretical, intellectual, and pluralist, leaving room for different ways of doing architecture. It explains why in the conclusion of Bekaert's introduction to the catalog, a repetitive, classicist, and symmetrical house by Charles Vandenhove, an early "formless" experiment in participation by Lucien Kroll, and the combined structuralism and brutalism in a monastery by Marc Dessauvage could all three be put forward as important recent achievements, and as indications for the future.

One development at the time was not explicitly dealt with—the changing relationship between the different parts of Belgium. Perhaps this issue was implicit in the image chosen for the catalog cover and exhibition poster: a cube with planes in the colors of the national flag (black, yellow, and red), miraculously balancing on one corner. It's possible, but hard to prove, that the very idea of Building in Belgium was polemical in that sense too—that it made a plea for Belgian unity following a decade of often heated debates and arguments about the differences between the north and the south of the country. In Flanders, the main issue was language, and the possibility of being spoken to in Dutch—and not in French—by institutions and authorities. Some Flemish people therefore felt, perhaps without justification, a kind of kinship with the population of Congo: the French-speaking elite was, in a sense, in many Flemish cities acting as colonizers, inciting a desire for more autonomy, or even for independence. In Wallonia, the point of contention was economic: in the postwar years, the coal-mining industry started collapsing, and unions, traditionally much stronger in the French-speaking part of Belgium, argued for support and continuing investments. But Flemish politicians in the Belgian government—such as Gaston Eyskens, from the powerful Christian Democratic party, who served three times as prime minister from 1949 to 1973—did not quite like this prospect. At the start of 1970, the so-called First State Reform—five more would follow, with the sixth in 2012 being the last (for now)—was agreed upon, in an attempt to calm things down. The country became divided by law into three cultural communities, based on the predominant language: Dutch, French, and German. From that moment, each region gained the right to make its own decisions in different areas (but not all), and Belgium slowly turned from a straightforward unitary state into an intricate federal one, a process that could have been considered as completed in 1993, when the direct election of the separate regional parliaments was installed, but that continues to this day.

The role of the monarchy became smaller and smaller, and in fact so did the influence of political decisions in an expanding and liberated market economy. From the Second World War onward, the economic center of gravity of the country started moving to the north, with Brussels as an administrative and bureaucratic pivotal point, European unification as a driving wheel, and the port of Antwerp as a headquarters. This city along the Scheldt morphed into the multinational business center it had been once before in the sixteenth century, and Flanders became the prosperous region that Wallonia had been a few decades earlier. Based on the scientific expertise of a population educated by several universities, import and export became key, mostly of light- industrial products, such as, recently, the millions of vaccines against Covid-19 that were produced in 2021 by the branch of American multinational Pfizer in Puurs, thirty kilometers from Antwerp. There is one recent building, completed in 2016, that can be regarded as a monument not only to the economic activities of that port but also to the evolution of Belgium over the past half- century, during which the two main parts of the country have further distinguished themselves from each other. In the series of official and representative buildings commissioned and paid for since 1830 by kings, governments, mayors, and aldermen, Antwerp Port House is the most sophisticated one, although it is no less brutal and domineering than most of its predecessors. It houses, by means of office spaces and meeting rooms, the activities of the port company of Antwerp, an autonomous municipal enterprise with politicians as board members, but also with its own CeO, that merged in the spring of 2022 with the port of Bruges. The unified port, as was stipulated in the online press release announcing the fusion, "provides for 74,000 direct and 90,000 indirect jobs, and with an added value of almost 21 billion euros or 4.5 percent of the Belgian GDP, it is by far the country's largest economic engine. It will be the largest European export port, the largest vehicle export port and the largest integrated chemical cluster in Europe."42 Perhaps fittingly so, the Port House is the building in Belgium— as well as the most recent piece of architecture— included in Baby's First Eames: The ABCs of Modern Architecture and Design, compiled and published *in New York in 2018 by Julie Merberg. It even ingeniously takes care, in this publication, of the last three letters of the alphabet: Z is for the architect of the headquarters, while the young readers are recommended to "look for Xs and Ys and diamonds that shine in Zaha Hadid's sparkling Port House design."43*

In the 2008 competition for the Antwerp Port House, one rule was laid down: the original building, a disused fire station from the early twentieth century, had to be preserved. Its architect, Emiel van Averbeke, had based his design at the time on the Oosterhuis, a kontor or foreign trading post of the Hanseatic League, erected about 1560, one kilometer closer to the city, on the other side of the Kattendijkdok.

For centuries, the symmetrical, stately, and repetitive Oosterhuis functioned as the seat of the German trade union, but it was destroyed by fire in 1893. (Its location currently houses the City Museum of Antwerp, in a sturdy, orange, rectangular tower with a spiral of escalators inside, completed in 2011 by the office led by Willem Jan Neutelings.) The Port House by Zaha Hadid therefore rests on, or erupts from, a fire station that closely resembles a vanished building from the previous flowering period of the port of Antwerp, in the sixteenth century. While in those days trade was largely in the hands of Germans, the port is currently run locally, albeit thanks to connections with foreign, mainly American, multinationals. The new headquarters enunciate the resulting pride and self- confidence, while trying to connect, as a kind of boat- shaped, aerodynamic liaison, the city (to the south) with the expanding harbor (to the north). Here, an architectural poetics developed by Hadid in the early 1980s survives as something completely different; while Kenneth Frampton heralded Hadid's drawings in 1983 as the suggestion of "the scintillating paradise of the world" and as the start of "a new modern project," this once iconoclastic way of envisioning the future of architecture is now the driving force behind images of powerful, brilliant capital.44 The Port House is different because it's an extension of an existing and rigidly symmetrical building, emblematic for the classical, repetitive, ordered, and supposedly oppressive architecture Hadid wanted to get rid of, by infusing the discipline with invention, complexity, non-Euclidean geometry, and frighteningly unlikely building structures. Christian Rapp, a contender in the 2008 competition for the Port House but since 2015 the city architect of Antwerp, publicly called it "a nightmare realized" shortly after its

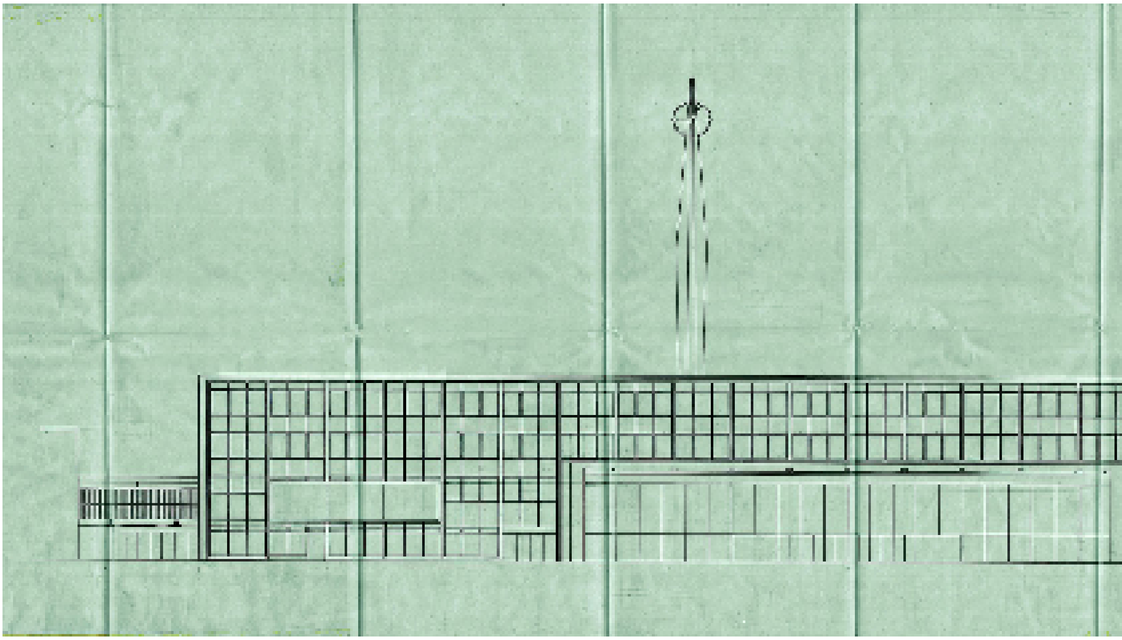

DOMVS HANSÆ TEVTONICÆ IN VRBE ANTVERPIENSI

Oosterhuis, Antwerp. From Frederik De Wit, Theatrum ichnographicum omnium urbium et praecipuorum oppidorum Belgicarum XVII (Amsterdam, 1706). National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague.

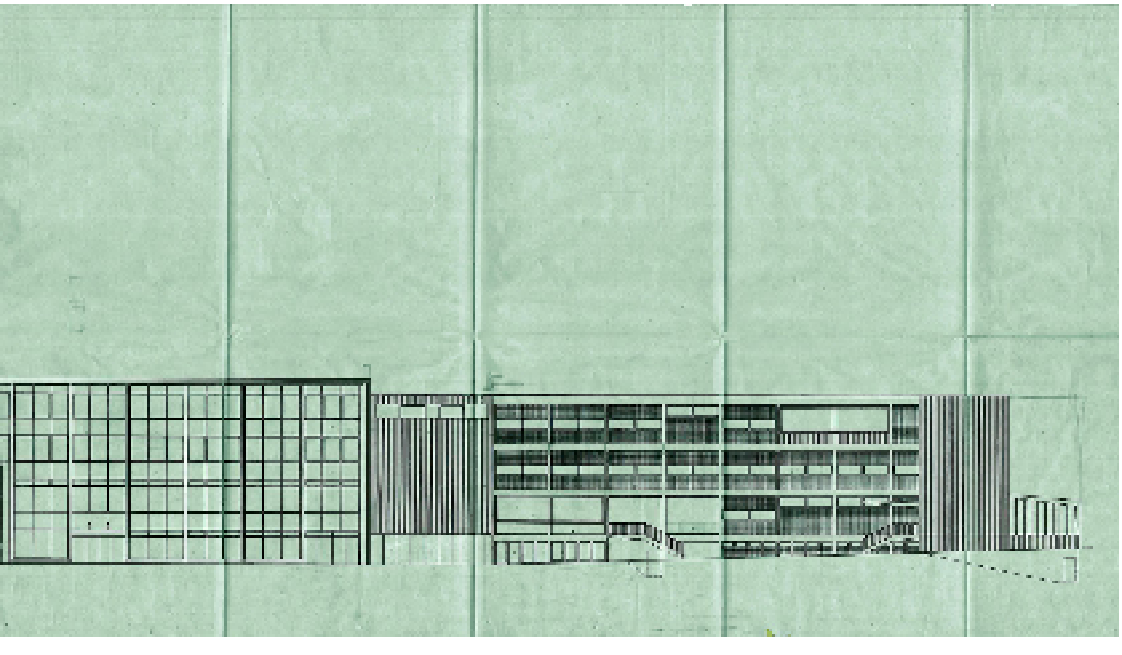
completion. It was a remark that unintentionally echoed a description by Mark Wigley from the catalog of a MoMA exhibition in 1988, in which Hadid was prominently present (and justifiedly so). Deconstructivist projects, Wigley wrote, “mark a different sensibility, one in which the dream of pure form has been disturbed. Form has become contaminated. The dream has become a kind of nightmare.”[45] One of the reasons Hadid’s Port House works is that it is unprecedented and unreal, as indeed a nightly and oneiric manifestation of architecture’s subconscious, but also of all the forces and transactions that proliferate in the substructure of at least half of Belgian society today.

Representing the economic ambitions of Flanders in the twenty-first century, this building is—as an embodiment of nationalism—a successor to the Palace of Justice in the late 1800s and the Atomium in the middle of the twentieth century, although those pieces of architecture still had a distinctly Belgian face. A current counterpart also exists in the southern half of the country, and it was authored by an equally world-famous architect, born at the beginning of the 1950s. The Liège-Guillemins railway station, designed by Santiago Calatrava with paint and brush to look like an organic sculpture, is one of the four Belgian stations on the high-speed rail network connected to the Netherlands, France, and Germany. Opened in 2009, it is made of steel, glass, Belgian bluestone, and white concrete, with a main arch that is 160 meters long and 32 meters high, running lengthways down the tracks, rather than laterally, and extending toward the city. Under the tracks lies a spacious, wide hall, with counters and small shops—a cavernous, dug-in space, without any right angles, with subdued light transpiring through glass bricks in the platforms above.

It’s possible to dismiss this building as another coquettish sculptural spectacle that has cost three times more than originally budgeted. Especially the latter criticism has been repeatedly pointed out by certain Flemish politicians, who see Calatrava’s precious station primarily as an expression of the eagerness with which the southern part of Belgium squanders the financial transfers—embedded in the state structure, which continues to be based on solidarity between the regions—that it receives from the more prosperous north. And yet Liège-Guillemins ennobles public transport and the activity of commuting like no other building in Belgium before or since. It is very site-specific, maybe not so much in a formal sense but certainly in a historical sense, to such an



eGAU, Liège- Guillemins Station, facade, date unknown (1950s). GAr— Archives d'Architecture, Université de Liège.



extent that quite a lot of nostalgia is involved. In 2010, a book was published with photographs documenting not only the building but also the activities of the workers who meticulously constructed it, in a process that lasted a full decade. Although all the steel used was produced in a factory in Spain, it is as if the construction of Liège- Guillemins was expected to revive the industry of the olden days temporarily and on a small scale, after which it could remain as a memory, but also as a hope for repetition. This is how Belgian author Caroline Lamarche expressed it in her lyrical contribution to the photo album: “More than fifteen years ago, a few men and women dreamed of a region that would revive its destiny. Liège has always been a crossroads. In the industrial era, Europe’s rails and locomotives were all manufactured in the Meuse region. Girders and other building materials, armaments, cut glass, all set off from Guillemins, en route for Paris, Milan, Munich or Amsterdam.”[46]

This history is also visible in the previous train stations at the same spot, before Calatrava was called upon. In 1863, the Belle Époque station was built as a mixture of the stations of Paris- Est and Paris- Nord, conceived shortly before. On top of the gabled roof, above a large arched window that illuminated the entrance hall, stood a female statue, symbolizing industry. This station was demolished in 1956, and replaced by a modernist one in 1958, just in time for the world’s fair. The building serving as a contemporary model was not French but Italian: Stazione di Roma Termini, completed in 1950 with Pier Luigi Nervi as engineer. Its more modest and less festive northern counterpart was designed by a threesome of local architects working together under the unassuming moniker eGAU— Études en Groupe d’Architecture et d’Urbanisme. The fundamental design decision for the train station was to prolong the ceiling of the ticket office, which also functions as the waiting room, in the form of a canopy projecting toward the forecourt.[47] *What predominantly characterized the apparently neutral character of this functionalist building, however, were the two tightly rhythmic office floors above-glass facades that were partly destroyed in the winter of 1960, when a striking mass of workers expressed its anger at the unwillingness of the Belgian government to continue investing in the ailing steel industry in the south of the country.*

These recent episodes in the history of the relationship between politics, economy, and architecture in Belgium can also shed light on the nature of contemporary building culture, as well *as the differences in policy and decision making between the two major regions of the country. The autonomy that was granted to Flanders and Wallonia from the 1970s onward was not used in the same way. While Flanders, due partly to nationalist revanchism but mainly to economic optimism, decided to invest heavily in architecture’s future, Wallonia remained stuck in the past, spending cultural funds mostly on heritage and conservation. This difference explains why the buildings for which Belgian architecture has become internationally known in recent decades can be found in Flanders or in Brussels. Does this mean that the country had better split up, if only from an architectural point of view? Not necessarily. Not only does no one know what would happen, once the divorce of the parents was initiated, with the fantastic problem-child called Brussels, but the different regions need and enrich each other in unexpected ways. It might be a risky comparison, but just as the Soviet Union before the fall of the Wall reminded the Western world of the possibility of a society based on solidarity and the pursuit of equality, so does the south of Belgium soften or contradict the self-centered and profit- driven impetus in the north. Architecture in Flanders, “liberated” from Wallonia, would soon threaten to get bogged down in the unrestrained nationalistic display for which Belgium had been known in the nineteenth century. Baudelaire is still right: Belgium—and its architecture—is safeguarded by the balance of rivalries.*

2 Flowers on a Dunghill

One of the more popular books published recently on Belgian buildings is a celebration of ugliness. In 2011, entrepreneur, marketeer, and vlogger Hannes Coudenys posted an image on Tumblr of a single-family house, photographed on a rainy day, along an empty asphalted road with an equally empty bike path. The small home, part of a continuous row, features an unusually sharp triangular, white-lined dormer that echoes in a smaller, more obtuse triangle just above the garage door. The dark gray facade, clad in wooden tongue-and-groove boards, contains two upright windows on the second floor and a horizontal window on the ground floor, next to the door and the garage. All windows are blinded by cream-colored curtains. Underneath the snapshot, Coudenys wrote an ironic comment, mocking the incomprehensible design decisions of the inhabitants.

The post was the first in what became a much-loved series, entitled Ugly Belgian Houses. In 2015, a book with the same title was published (subtitled Don't Try This at Home) in a bilingual edition (Dutch and English); in 2021, a sequel followed: More Ugly Belgian Houses.[1] In a thematic issue on Belgium of the Architectural Review in 2018, Coudenys was invited to write an account for the journal's recurring feature "Outrage." "Wherever you come from to get to Belgium," he wrote, "you end up in a nightmarish architectural Legoland. Everything is possible, everything is permitted. Except it feels as if you're stepping on Lego blocks the whole time. An excruciating torture which can only be endured if you are Belgian."[2] Of course, "endured" is hardly the right word, and the author is being ironic here, too. Many Belgians wouldn't describe their country as ugly, if they even consider its aesthetic qualities at all. For others, ugly houses— and national ugliness in general— are a source of slightly perverse pleasure, fueled by a combination of sarcasm, pity, and disbelief, but also by a sense of superiority and progress, contradicted by an almost completely unconscious nostalgia, and by small amounts of jealousy as well. The author of Ugly Belgian Houses is a member of my generation— we were both born in 1982— but it is very unlikely that the constructions he photographs, collects, and comments upon, although relatively affordable, are inhabited by our peers. The people who built or, in many cases, renovated and refurbished these houses between the 1960s and the 1990s are our parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles— boomers, in other words, lower middle class, who were just in time to escape the standardization of taste, or rather, to still have the luxury to hardly bother with such things. For subsequent generations, confronted since the turn of the twenty- first century with the question of how to dwell and how to live, the available options have become rare, and truly DIY "creativity," along with the aesthetic goofs and monstrous errors it often causes, is in most cases obliterated by forms of lifestyle prescribed and scripted in myriad ways. We don't live there anymore, in those ugly Belgian houses outside of cities, in suburbia, and only reachable by car— what we inhabit is more temporary, decent, supposedly urban, ecological, monotonous, and less ugly, or at least in line with commercialized trends and habits. Yet these crazy little palaces we visit only during family parties stay there, sprinkled over the territory, thousands and thousands of them, as deliberate free- spirited choices from the past that were, of course, also very cultural and ideological in nature.

It is remarkable that Coudenys was able to communicate his findings to an international architecture audience in precisely that section of the Architectural Review. The feature "Outrage" was named after the title of a special issue of the magazine, edited in 1955 by Ian Nairn, in which the aesthetic degradation of Britain's landscapes— urban, rural, and everything in between— was condemned in the most serious and engaged way. Whereas the manifestation and perception of architectural ugliness was still a matter of concern in the 1950s, and not only in the Architectural Review, more than half a century later it has become a matter of irony, enjoyment, powerlessness, and popularity on social media and elsewhere. Nairn's Outrage issue of June 1955 was followed in December of the same year by a "counter- attack" with strategies for saving the urban fabric and altering the perceptions of planners and politicians.3 What Coudenys proposed in 2018 was to bid farewell to brick as a building material and to extend Belgian's borders in all directions, to create more opportunities for the consumption of space. As the opening line of Elvis Costello's debut album from 1977 goes: "I used to be disgusted, and now I try to be amused."4

This aphorism—not coincidentally, from the year in which Charles Jencks's The Language of Post-Modern Architecture was published, as a development of alternative ways of reading and enjoying architecture— can summarize the evolution of architecture's relationship to ugliness, or more generally to everything that does not meet aesthetic standards. Starting in the 1950s, and until the end of the 1960s, awareness, indignation, and even revolt against the automatic but overtly chaotic evolution of the postwar environment were freely expressed; by the end of the 1970s, certain kinds of resignation and acceptance had set in, together with an ongoing exploration of other strategies to deal with society's architectural disobedience.

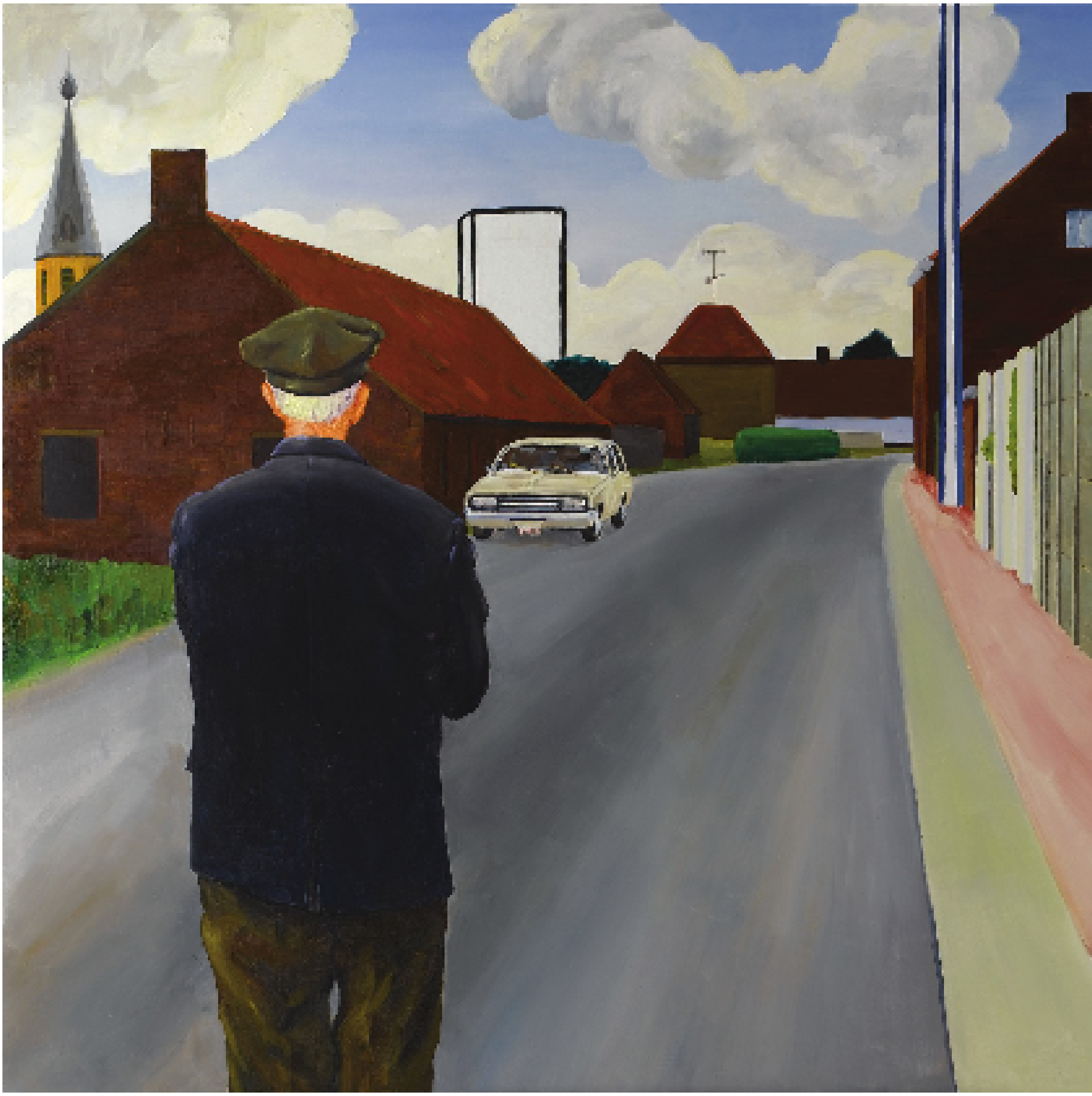
Most spectacularly for Belgium, in 1968, architect Renaat Braem published his manifesto The Ugliest Country in the World— sixty- eight pages illustrated with four black- and- white line drawings depicting "the countryside: neither city, nor village," "the daily crusade" to work, "the individual garden," and, finally, the author's personal version of the Ville Radieuse, with towering ziggurats surrounded by neat highways and clumps of trees.5 Braem denounced the total lack of urban planning in Belgium, but also the many political decisions that went against his own composite worldview, which was a mixture of communism, socialism, positivism, and Catholicism. Most of all, he wanted to make his fellow Belgians conscious of the spatial and architectonic conditions they were living in. The subtitle of the book— Hiking Guide in the Belgian Jungle, Intended for Awakening Sleepwalkers— indicates as much; it was meant to have been the main title, but the publisher preferred the catchier slogan Braem had launched previously during public lectures, and that had made him somewhat famous.6 He didn't shy away from almost comical cultural pessimism and apocalyptic phrasings, simply because that was in his character, but possibly also because he was trying to surpass the warnings of those who preceded and influenced him: “This time it’s about a true mutation that should save both our environment and the human race from total decadence. . . . This is about being or not being, about being a Christian or being an accessory to crime, about being human or being complicit in a return to animality.”[7]

Nevertheless, he did aptly and presciently describe the ecological, political, and spatial consequences of the way postwar Belgium was changing and continued to change. Above all, he had an eye for what was visually terrible, mostly because it was so stylistically incoherent. The book contains many passages that testify to Braem’s quality of description, not only of houses and buildings, but also of other things many of his fellow Belgians were wont to do:

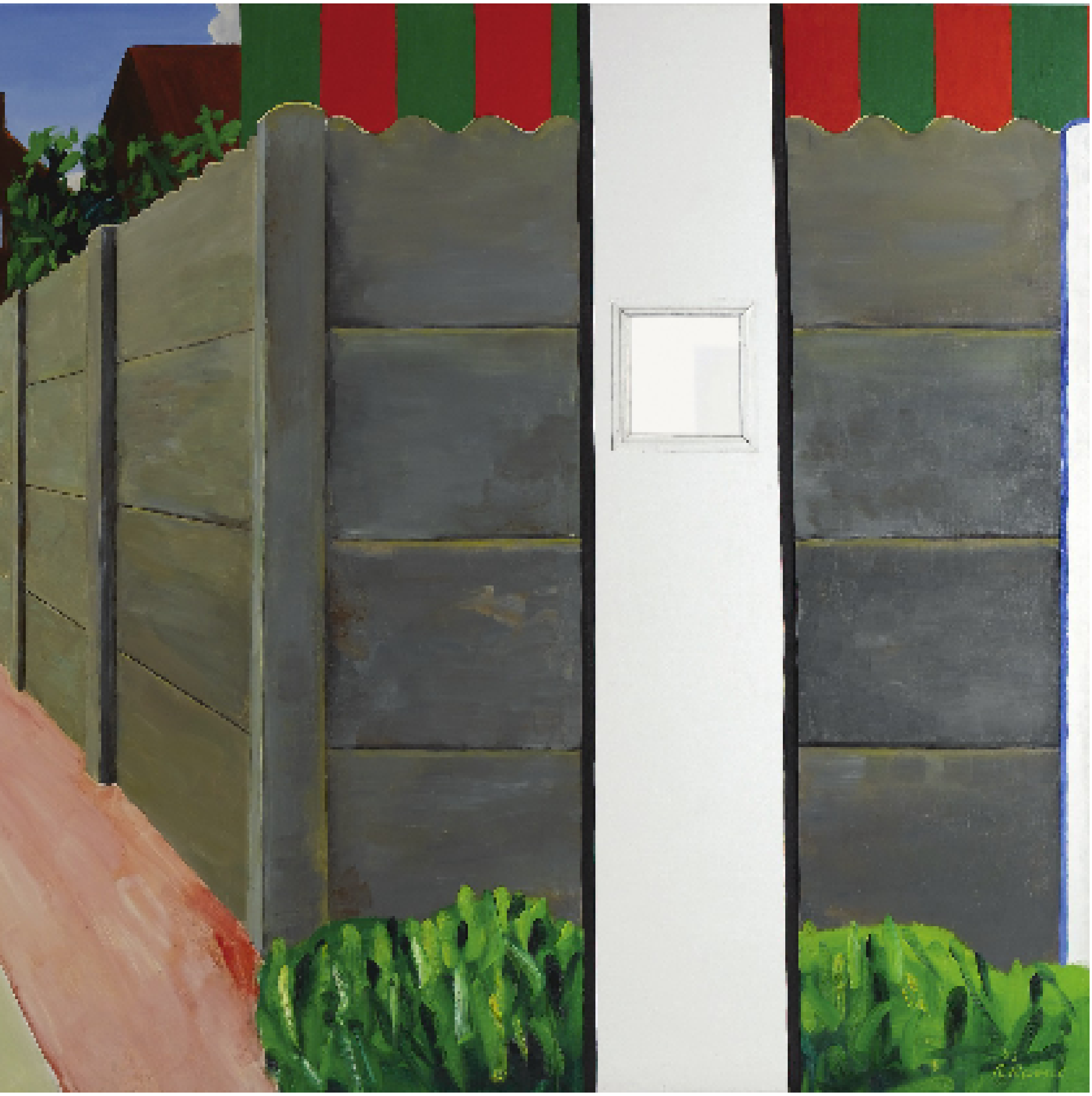
> Roof finishes scream their presence through their complex nature, texture, and color; pink asbestos, green slate, red brick, black varnished tiles; and outside of the agglomerations, where every now and then a tree reveals that we’re in the countryside, cozy pseudo- villas and pseudo-castles boast marvelously cut, thatched roofs, shaped like a page’s head. You can fill up at gas stations in Norman style, colonial style, Flemish style, modern style, and industrial style. You can strengthen your inner being in hostels with checkerboard curtains and cast- iron signage, in grill rooms with pseudo timber framing, in fries shops where cut- out cardboard chefs invite you in. Bars can be found in endless variety, from guild houses or maisons du people with a barren, repulsive, semiofficial look lacking of character, to the most inviting little cafés with red curtains and discrete car parks.[8]

The Ugliest Country in the World is on a par with other books, following Nairn’s Outrage, written by architects and critics, all part of a generation born after the First World War and educated according to the modernist principles of CIAM, but disillusioned as adults by what had become of the promising chances that the end of the Second World War, and the prospect of global peace and Western prosperity, had seemed to offer. Already in 1960, Robin Boyd had written The Australian Ugliness, criticizing the pitiful condition of popular taste and architecture in Australia, and indicating the negative influence of the United States.9 In 1964, Peter Blake's God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape was published, concluding with a call to "intellectual leadership": it was time for architects to take responsibility and to educate the population they were working for, instead of letting their decisions be dictated by the lowest common denominator. Regional and temperamental differences notwithstanding, what the three books by Boyd, Blake, and Braem share is bafflement at "the public eye" which is "not sensitive, and does not bruise easily," to borrow a description from Ada Louise Huxtable's 1964 review of God's Own Junkyard in the New York Times. "It has even become increasingly inured to shock," she wrote. The books, as well as Huxtable's reception, attest to the frustration of architects and critics about the fact that "we have settled for the poor, the mean and the ugly in our inescapable physical environment."10 The tragedy lies, in other words, in the inability of the intellectual to be influential and authoritative, and to exercise power; more positively put, it is (or could be) a matter of education and emancipation of others, empowered and made possible by knowledgeable people. The main question has to do with how "objective" a judgment on beauty and ugliness can be. What does it matter if an individual, albeit with the diploma of an architect, gets in a fury about what happened to Belgian space and architecture? Why (and how) can one person's critical analysis have general validity? Should it be of interest to other people? Should they listen to Braem— believe him, or obey him, even— and could what he writes and proposes, therefore, be truly the basis of change?

Understandably, there are many discrepancies between The Ugliest Country in the World from 1968 and Ugly Belgian Houses from 2015— the most obvious difference being that the latter was compiled not by an architect but by a self- declared "digital creative," while the former was written by a modernist who took it upon himself to indeed dictate that an entire country should reorganize its society according to his own conceptions. More importantly, a comparison of the two books shows how the very idea of architectonic beauty has mutated during the past half- century. Collectively judging whether a country is beautiful or ugly pertains to society's ability to agree (and act) on what is important, valuable, and worth pursuing; beauty— in this sense— is understood as a fundamental and political problem, and as one of the most



Roger Raveel, One of the Still Thousands of Village Streets in Flanders and Elsewhere, 1972. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.



important and categorical concepts one can think of. When Braem called Belgium very, very ugly, he did so not only to indicate what was visibly and aesthetically wrong, but also to impeach everything that could be both cause and effect of that unsightliness, such as politics, consumerism, capitalism, individualism, and a general insensitivity at the core of human lives that were simply not well-lived. This kind of totalizing conflation—a grand narrative if there ever was one— of all aspects of form and content proved hard to sustain in the decades that followed, in an increasingly fragmented and specializing society; the indicted disorder, in other words, sabotaged its own all- embracing trial.

Yet the consideration of beauty as something that can be shared and meaningfully discussed as a political category has a long, solid and, all by itself, beautiful and philosophical tradition. The realm of beauty does not have to be subdivided into individual types, and it used to be more than a topic you cannot really talk about, let alone agree upon, because everyone has different opinions, secured by the right to personal taste. At least Immanuel Kant would have disagreed. Hannah Arendt, in a 1970 lecture on Kant's political philosophy, quoted from his Critique of Judgment from 1790: "The beautiful interests us only when we are in society. . . . A man abandoned by himself on a desert island would adorn neither his hut nor his person. . . . Man is not contented with an object if he cannot feel satisfaction in it in common with others."11 Or in Arendt's summary: "The nonsubjective element in the nonobjective senses is intersubjectivity. (You must be alone in order to think; you need company to enjoy a meal.)"12 Labeling an entire country as violating aesthetic ideals is, of course, the very hyperbole of this operation of transforming the subjective into the objective, and the next immediate step— dismissing the world or even the universe as ugly— is hard to surpass. The disgusted outrage typical of Braem's generation was still based, in good Kantian tradition, upon the conviction that the appearance of a country (and thus of society) was something that not only could be discussed— it could and should also be changed, as the direct manifestation of very diverse but crucial characteristics.

Braem's manifesto was largely met with approval. The Belgian painter Réne Guiette, who lived in Antwerp in a house from 1926 designed by Le Corbusier, sent Braem a short letter at the end of the summer of 1968, exclaiming: "My gratitude is immense!"13 In the journal La Maison, published in Brussels, architect Jan Tanghe *reviewed Braem's book in depth. Although he didn't agree with many aspects of Braem's analysis nor of his strategy— "One has the continuous impression that [Braem] is solving economic problems with philosophical means, and sociological difficulties with biased formal and urbanist forecasts"14— Tanghe did conclude with the confirmation that he agreed wholeheartedly: Belgium is the ugliest country in the world. This statement was something most architects and critics did not contradict, but the question remained: What should be done? How could this determination be more than a verdict without consequences? And more than a verdict, wasn't it an insurmountable problem, one that prevented architectural practice from thriving?*

The answers formulated to those questions are visible in what subsequently happened in Belgium to the very idea of architectural beauty (and its counterpart, ugliness), and it happened elsewhere too. In a 1972 essay entitled "The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline," Władysław Tatarkiewicz wrote that "the word and concept beauty have been retained in colloquial speech; they are used in practice rather than in theory. One of the central concepts in the history of European culture and philosophy has thus been reduced to the status of a mere colloquialism."15 Both words, "beauty" and "ugliness," almost disappeared from the official critical and theoretical discourse in architecture, as if they were burned down by their rather reckless use in those frantic manifestos of the 1950s and 1960s. Not surprisingly, neither beauty nor ugliness is one of the eighteen lemmas discussed in Adrian Forty's Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture from 2000.16 However, aesthetic judgments (often, but not always, paired with their ethical implications) remained as ubiquitous as necessary; matters pertaining to beauty did persist, but without being explicitly associated with the term and its age- old universalist aspirations. This also informs another change that occurred: the downsizing of architectural ambitions, from the (national) territory to the scale of the building (or, at the largest, that of urban planning). If the spatial organization of a country seemed, from now on, largely out of reach, a public discussion could still be maintained about its architecture— not necessarily in general, but by means of isolated interventions and realizations. If it had become impossible to discuss and transform the one space shared by everyone, it should still be possible to talk, and agree or disagree, about contrasting spaces with a smaller scale and with fewer, or more implicit and complex, claims on universality and exemplariness.

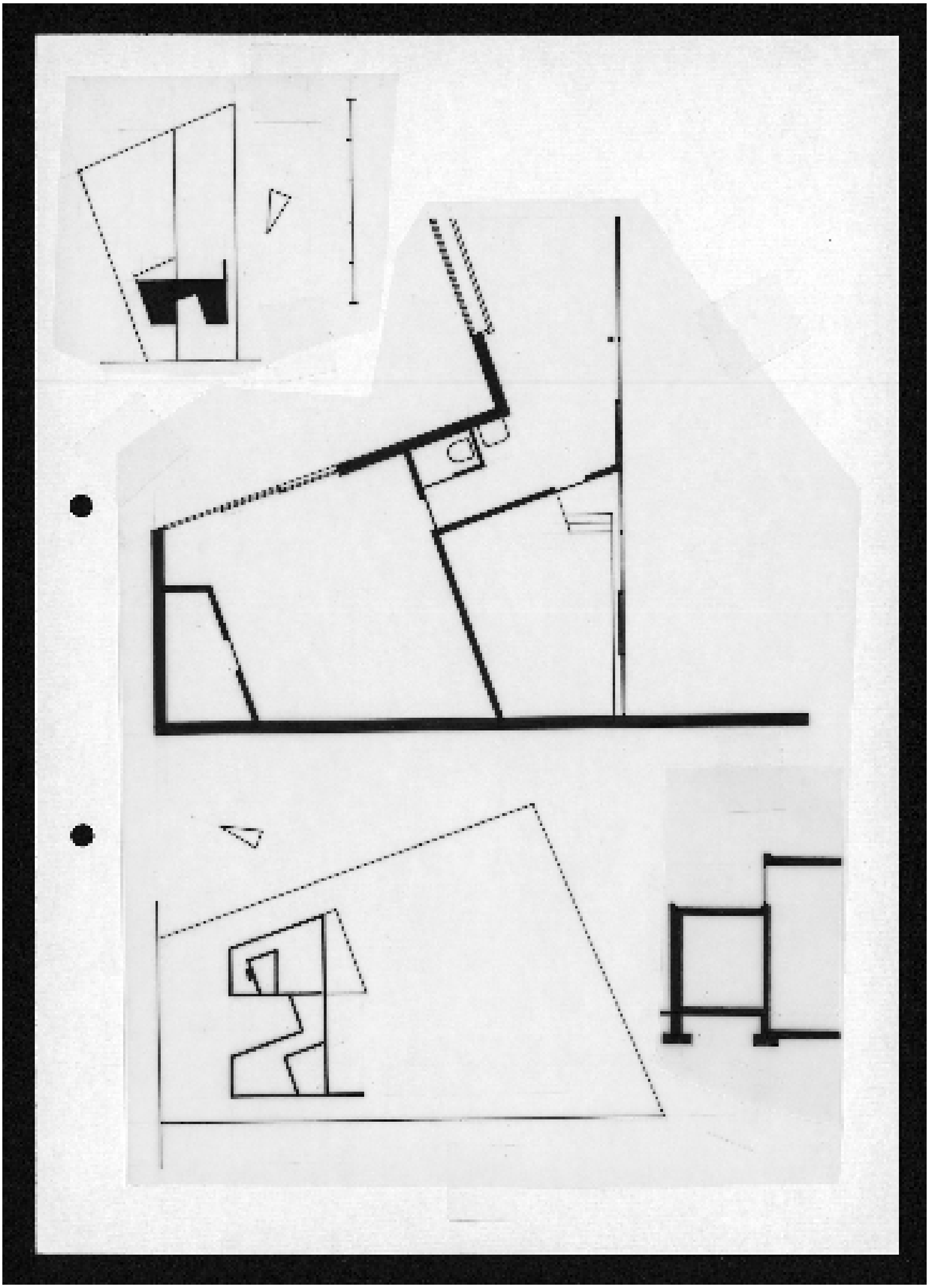
That strategy becomes immediately visible in certain paintings from the 1960s and the 1970s by artists who lived and worked in a suburbanizing, modernizing, and thus disappearing countryside in Belgium. More restrained, registering, and pensive than Braem, they noticed how the traditional and obvious beauty of the natural landscape was disrupted by the introduction of seemingly foreign and even alienating elements. By combining the pictorial techniques of both representation and abstraction, these painters nevertheless tried to combine the old and the new, and the ugly and the beautiful, within the meaningful whole of a framed painting. A canvas from 1972 by Roger Raveel, entitled One of the Still Thousands of Village Streets in Flanders and Elsewhere is an example: it depicts red- brown houses, patches of green, and a man wearing a work coat, seen from the back, a cap on his head.

What is it that intersects, blocks, or crosses out this rural tableau? Is it the white post on the front right, running from top to bottom, on which a strange little mirror is mounted? Is it the red- and- green- striped awning behind one of the garden walls, almost like a work by Daniel Buren? Is it the abstract white bar on the horizon, not so much a building as the first drawing by an architect of a tower yet to be build? Or is it the gray asphalt on the street, clearly only recently repaved, on which one car is entering the former village? In the words of Raveel himself: “Where can one better descry the infiltration of modern life than in a village in the countryside? In the city, everything is immediately integrated, one doesn’t see as sharply the isolating, and contrasting-alienating, mechanism of publicity, the gas station, concrete, the car, and so on.”17

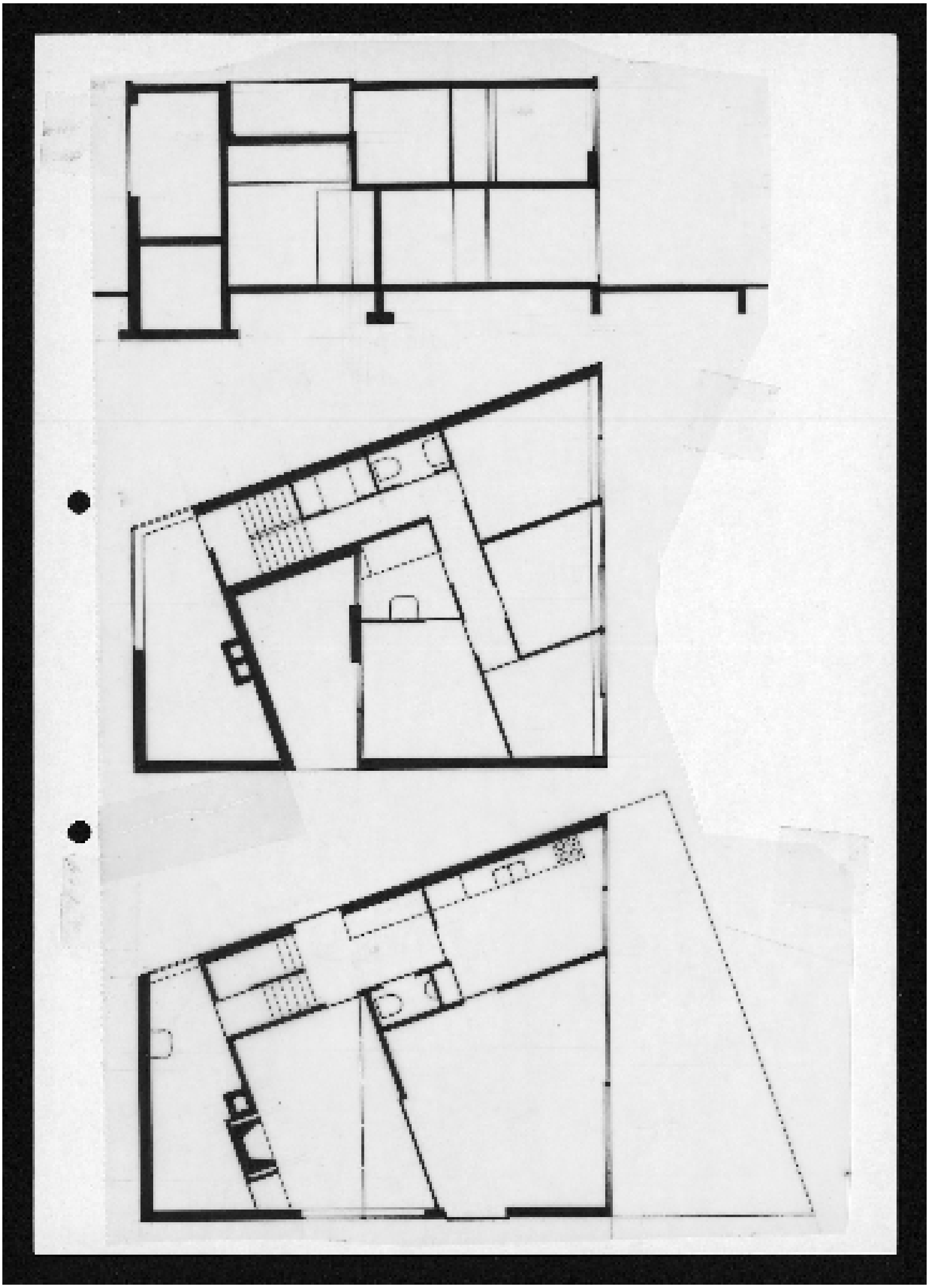
Equally, in architectural circles, dialectical ways for dealing with the evolution of the built environment were developed, with antinomies such as ugly and beautiful, city and countryside, or good and bad. The 1971 exhibition Building in Belgium, organized by Geert Bekaert, can also be interpreted as an answer to Braem’s manifesto from 1968. Bekaert and Braem occupied divergent positions throughout their lives; while Bekaert, toggling between lucidity and pessimism, defended society’s right to architecture as a relatively marginal, partly elitist, but possibly valuable contribution, Braem continued to argue for a total, and if necessary totalitarian, systemic reversal— at least as a theoretician, because as an architect he had no objection to constructing bourgeois villas in the former countryside, in his peculiar, at times strangely biomorphic style. Concisely illustrating the irreconcilability between critic and architect is the dedication Braem wrote in the book publication of his essay “All or Nothing” in 1971, before sending it to Bekaert: “Don’t agree, but with the same pedigree.”18 In “All or Nothing,” Braem further tightened the convictions set forth in The Ugliest Country in the World: “What I want to stress most of all is that fragmented intervention, by partial corrections, do not improve but deteriorate the situation. . . . The life frame that encompasses us all must be transformed in its totality, that is to say, planned and complete, in order to create the conditions for a further upward development of humanity.”19

Bekaert had discussed Braem’s ideas already in 1966, commenting on a lecture the architect gave. He, too, agreed with the analysis, but not with the proposed resolutions. He set out an alternative to the desire to clear away and replace the entire Belgian mess: the more realist wish that “the most beautiful flowers can bloom on a dunghill.” “I confess,” Bekaert wrote in De Standaard, the most important Dutch- language newspaper, “that I consider the Belgian ugliness as a richer breeding ground for the future of architecture than the beauty that one can see accomplished in, for example, the ‘garden cities’ in the Netherlands.”20

From the early 1970s onward, architects in Belgium nearly collectively accepted that the quest for beauty— and more generally, the task of architecture as a profession— could best be embarked upon in the country’s dominant building type: the detached family house, located in that misty but ever- expanding area that was clearly no longer natural or rural, but that also lacked the density and historical complexity of cities. That quest was inconceivable without the assumed ugliness of the country, and thus of the majority of the other houses that were being built in the immediate vicinity, most often imitating the model of the traditional farm— in red brick, with a gable roof, surrounded by an allotment of grass, but of course without any cattle, grain, or farmers— combined with all the necessary technology, and with a car in front.21 The silent search for beauty by architects was to a high degree driven by the abounding ugliness of these domestic fictions, and it became an important raison d’être of architecture, rid of the revolutionary aspirations of largescale interventions, to rectify the ubiquitous violation by all these formulaic and mendacious houses.



Paul Neefs, House Pleysier, Turnhout, 1970, site plans, plan of the lower part of the house, sections. Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.



Paul Neefs, House Pleysier, Turnhout, 1970, section, plans of the upper part of the house (first and second floor). Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.

Aiming for distinction and difference in response to what doesn't agree with one's standards and beliefs is, of course, related to the more general problem of the gap between high and low culture, refined or popular taste, or between autonomous and heteronomous architecture. Increasing the contrast as high as possible seems the most obvious thing to do, although in that case the individualism that is typical of nearly every single house might reach unforeseen and spectacular heights. There are limits, partly imposed by building regulations, to the diversity that is feasible within one building type, and an architect who really wants to do something different than add just another house to the mix might also consider to exactly refuse to do so. This internal contradiction is reflected in another strategy, that of mimicry— of partly accepting some of the characteristics of vernacular architecture, popular taste, regional style, or industrial production, and subsequently combining, adapting, or surpassing them. Yet also this option is also not without its absurdities or paradoxes: why would you still need architects if they have resigned themselves to imitating, no matter how idiosyncratically, what self- builders, traditionalists, or developers do?

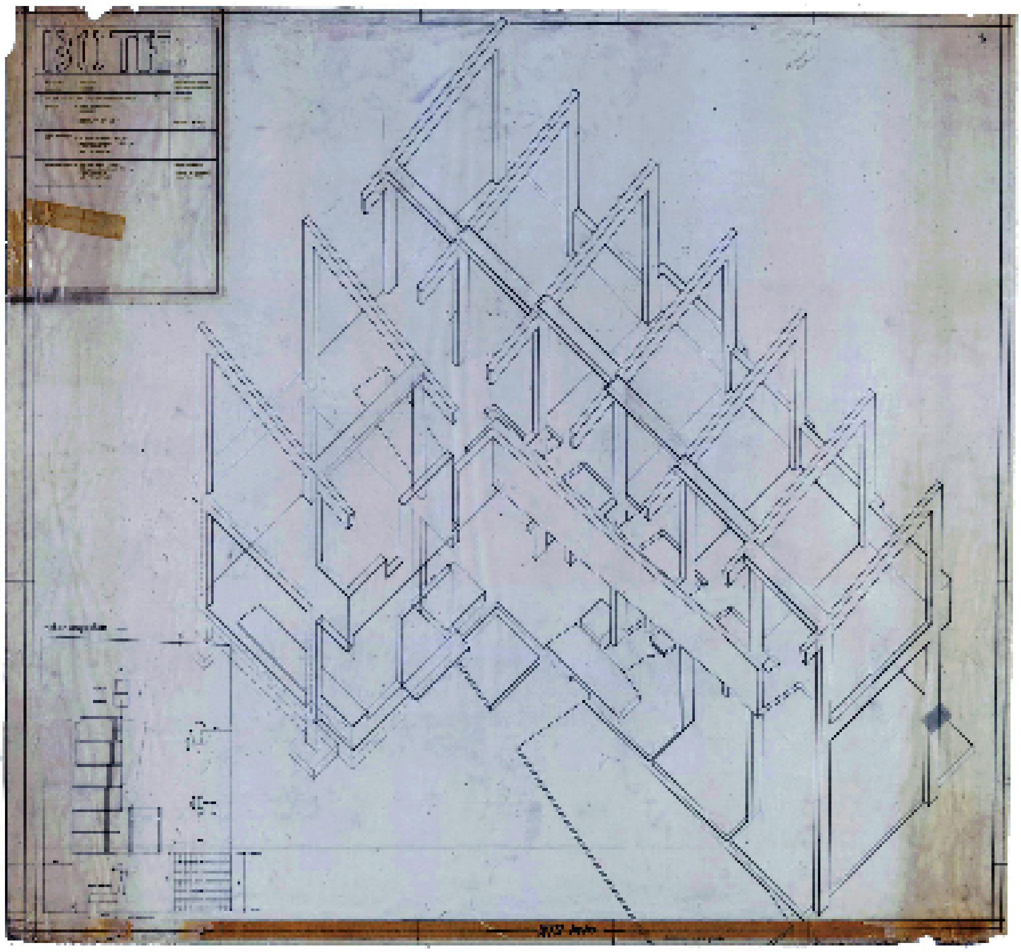
The most straightforward answer to these questions lies in composition and in form— in an autonomous architectural geometry that imposes a small kind of enigmatic order, amid a plethora of houses that appear to be unconscious combinations of industrialized building techniques and fictional illusions of rurality. One Belgian architect who explored this strategy from the 1960s until 1984— when he, not without professional disappointment, discontinued his practice at the age of fifty- one after the recession of the time— was Paul Neefs. At a young age, he was able to visit and talk to many well- known architects, such as Le Corbusier, Scharoun, Gropius, and Mies, and his immersion in canonic architecture was so complete that he allegedly couldn't enjoy a drink in a pub when the interior was too hideous for his taste.

In 1992, Belgian writer Leo Pleysier looked back on the house that Neefs designed for him and his family in 1970 in Rijkevorsel, a town in the north of Belgium, close to the Dutch border, and surrounded by protected nature reserves. Pleysier's point of departure for his "Notes of a Homebody"— the introduction to a monograph on Neefs's architecture— is ugliness: "Pretend it isn't there, the ugliness that has started its final siege. Don't pay attention to it. Don't allow it. If only out of self- preservation. Don't drown in *it. Refuse to give in to the aggression of an occupying force that is busy boarding up the last remaining landscape, the last patch of open space, the last strip of horizon. . . . I'd better stay inside. At home. In home. There I can. There, I can well-nigh find my words."22 The four qualities Pleysier decides to apply to Neefs's oeuvre, and to his own house, are characteristics that could pass for pillars of a formal theory of architectural beauty: coherence, transparency, lightness, and lack of emphasis.*

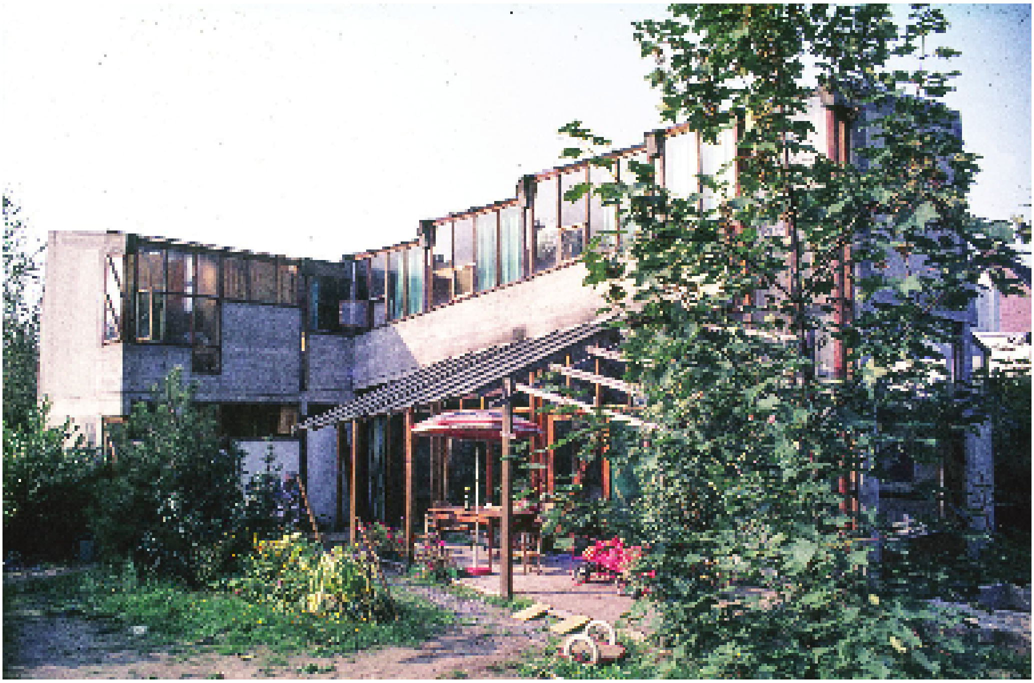
House Pleysier, which was extended in 1976, is above everything a floor plan: a meeting of two rectangular trapezoids around a semiopen patio, in which it seems almost impossible to reasonably organize the life of one family.

The composition is prompted by the dimensions of the building lot: narrow at the front, wider at the back. The oblique line of the end of the plot determines the arrangement of the interior spaces, and no single room is square or rectangular. The brick facades are all painted white; those facing the street have no windows, apart from one large opening in the bedroom on the upper floor. The uninterrupted facade at the back, facing the garden, consists of nothing but windows, creating views from inside the living room, the kitchen, and the writer's workplace. As in other houses built by Neefs— most visibly in his own house from 1963, a small dodecagon surrounded by trees— the unusual geometry of the architecture turns out to be of service, by facilitating daily use in unexpected and untraditional ways. The activity of dwelling— the life of the nuclear family—is neither a technical problem that has been solved, nor a tradition that could or should be restored or retold; it is, rather, something precarious and slightly absurd, which requires the confrontation with a quietly strange phenomenon (such as this architecture) to remain bearable. The use of triangles, trapezoids, rhomboids, and polygons, as well as the intersections between squares and circles in his plans, enabled Neefs to avoid the strict and schematic functionalism of both orthodox modernist architecture and industrialized serial housing production. These architectural forms are used and inhabited almost despite themselves, and in no way do they proudly or patronizingly emphasize how they help or serve the residents.

While it is true that, inside, the effects of that method are unemphatic, it is more difficult to claim the same from an external point of view. Next to House Pleysier, along the same straight two-lane street, lined with rows of trees, leading to the small center of



Bob Van Reeth, House Botte, Mechelen, 1970, axonometry. Collection Mil De Kooning.

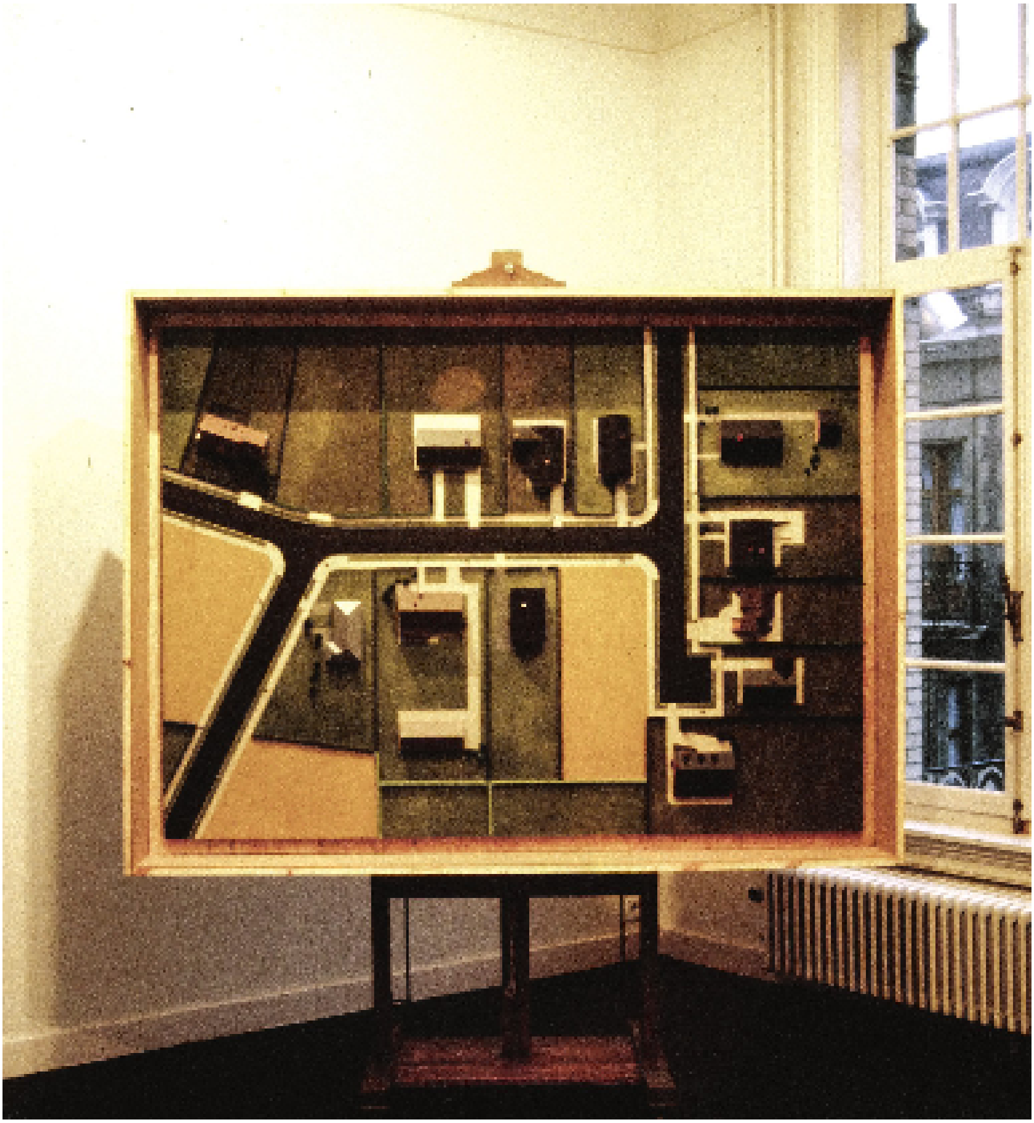


Bob Van Reeth, House Botte, Mechelen, 1970. Archives Bob Van Reeth.

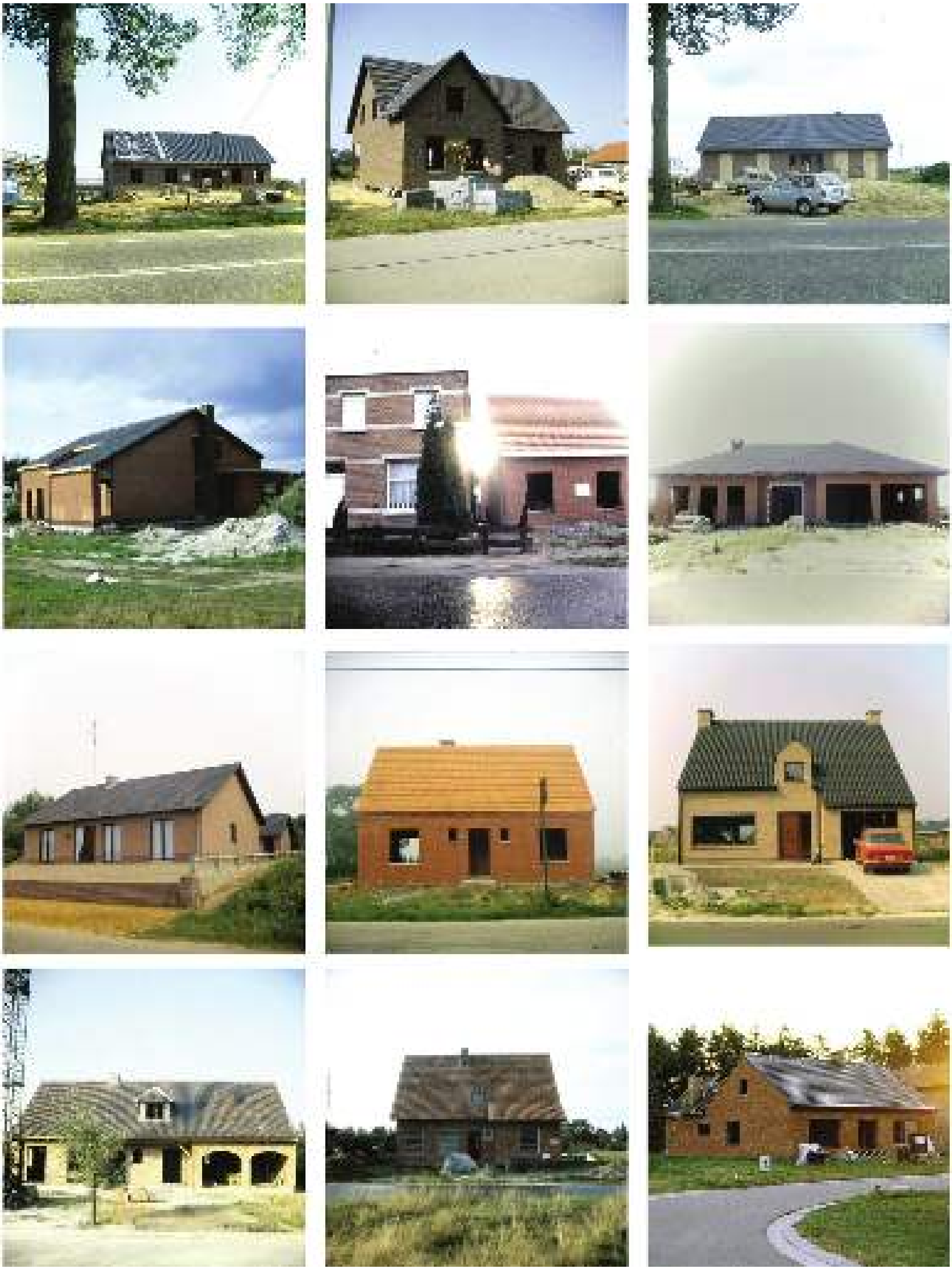
town, two other houses were constructed around the same time. The photographs that have been published of the house by Neefs don't show them, but to the left, a Spanish-looking villa was built in walls made out of bricks in all kinds of earth tones, with arched windows, a gently sloping roof, a driveway, and a garage, while to the right a two-story house stands; this one is a simple box in red brick with a gable roof, and with a front facade with six regular, rectangular windows—the entrance door is located in the side wall. Aren't these houses much more unemphatic than everything that Neefs ever built? They are, certainly, much more standardized and unassuming, but mostly because they lack ambition. They state, matter-of-factly, that wanting to dwell in a country that many have considered to be ugly, and to live in a beautiful house of one's own, is easy and unproblematic; it doesn't require a lot of effort or thought, so why would it even require architecture? And there is an absence of illusion within those anonymous constructions that the houses designed by Neefs—high-minded, serious, even pretentious—completely lack. For this reason, just like all pieces of architecture, Neefs's houses can be—and have been—criticized and deconstructed as a silent glorification of individualism or isolation, as a quest for intellectual authenticity barely concealing a desire for social distinction, or as an aestheticization of a very detrimental spatial habit. But it is also by means of its commitment to form and composition that this house keeps the possibility of architectural beauty alive—as well as the value of taking care, exactingly and with an eye for contradiction, meaning, and difficulty, not of the layout of an entire country, but at least of the spaces in which the members of one family are privileged enough to spend most of their days.

The same can be said, but differently, when the architecture is based less directly on formal and geometrical restraint, by allowing for an absorption of other kinds of influences, sometimes located in exactly those places that have been held responsible for Belgium's ugliness. For a periodical that presented "publicly accessible art" to a general audience in the Netherlands and the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, architect Bob Van Reeth wrote in 1973 an article entitled "Naive Architecture or the Poetic Do-It-Yourself." Reacting to both the overtly methodical and supposedly therapeutic abstraction of a lot of postwar architecture, as well as to the streamlined and mediatized encouragements to decorate one's house as tastefully and neatly as possible, Van Reeth's short *text was a condensed and local counterpart to Bernard Rudofsky's Architecture without Architects from 1964, or to Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour's Learning from Las Vegas from 1972. "Naive architecture, the environment of the less- inhibited do- it- yourselfer, is special and different, because it doesn't meet the standards one tries to find with everyone else. Naive architecture has no standards. . . . It is not an architecture of prophets, not a recipe for others," the young architect wrote.23 Van Reeth was apprehensive of elevating this highly individualist folk architecture into a movement or a system, nor did he want to overestimate its power. He noted, "All kinds of examples are available: richly nuanced, self- made palaces, amateur museums, houses, country houses, squats, little backsides, dovecotes, but without a doubt they do not constitute a powerful counterculture. They are unordered, incoherent, and as such extremely vulnerable but nevertheless ineradicable, because people will always expect rapture, pleasure, and excitement from life, and because they will always muster the energy to make that happen."24 In several projects from the end of the 1960s, Van Reeth dealt with the difficult question of whether and how an architect can translate this unwanted contrariness into architecture. He addressed this issue most concisely in a detached house he built for a family with five children. The client of House Botte "hates furniture," the architect wrote in his notebook following a first meeting in May 1969, and he wanted a "functional hangar (given the tight budget)," but was "prepared to go far."25 What the architect designed was a rugged structure in brutalist concrete, loosely based on R. M. Schindler's 1926 Lovell Beach House in California, with large porticoes extending over two stories.*

The structure is elaborate and composite— every internal unity or uniformity is avoided— but it is clearly of a piece too, as an unmistakable and solid L-shaped object. Inside, a sloping ramp with a massive parapet provides access to the bedrooms, offset in plan as well as in elevation. The wooden doors and windows are mounted directly against floors and walls, and so is the large overhang in front of the living area. The overall appearance and experience of the house is defined by two materials— wood and concrete, with the wood, in small and fragmented doses, softening the brutality and the massiveness of the concrete. Compared to the houses by Paul Neefs, this one by Van Reeth is more emphatic, including the ways in which family life is formally "escorted": the individuality of each member is confirmed, and the complexity



Luc Deleu / T.O.P. Office, Manifesto to the Order, model, 1982. Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.



Luc Deleu / T.O.P. Office, Manifesto to the Order, photographs, 1982. Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.

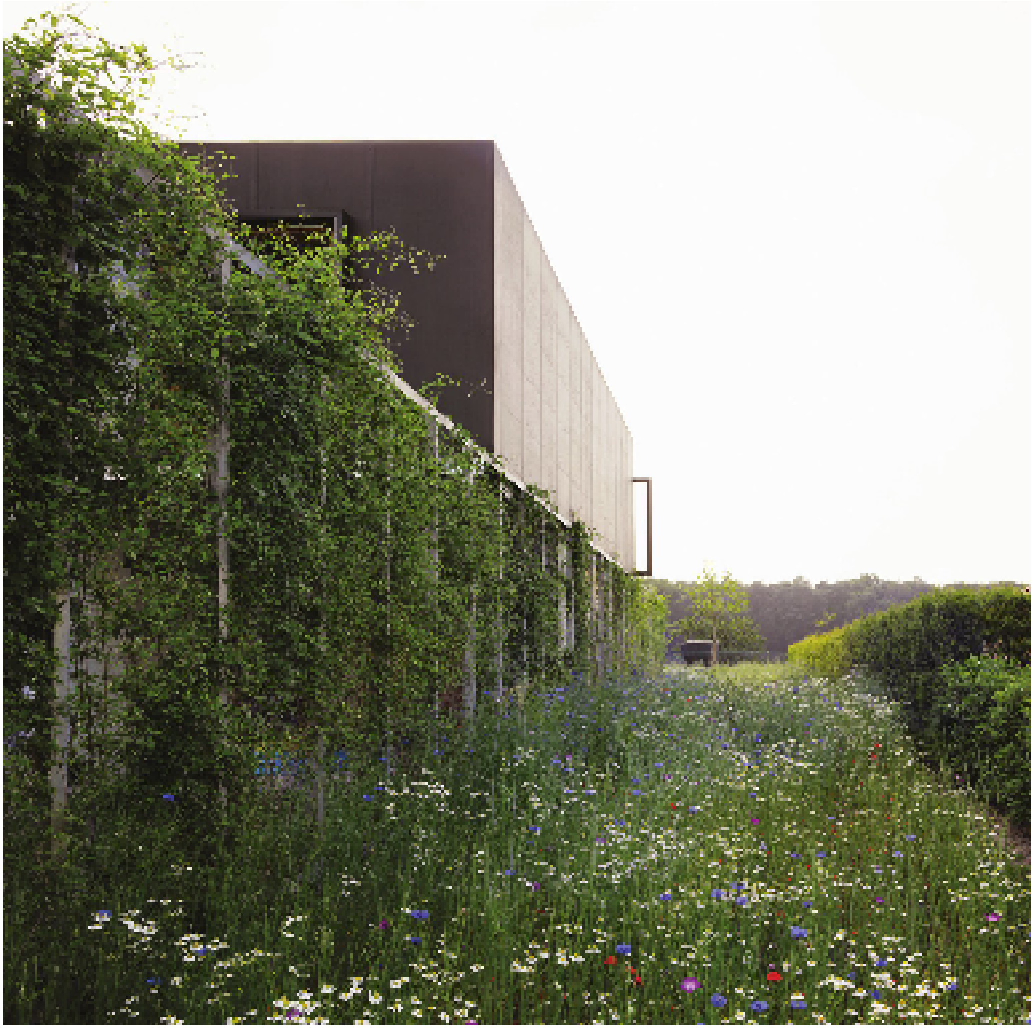
and unpredictability of life is staged, sought out, and emphasized rather than taken as a given.

Beauty, here, is pursued in the presentation and composition of a set of spaces and building elements that seem to have accumulated over time— not unlike, indeed, the naive constructions of do- it- yourselfers, elaborated upon day after day during an entire lifetime, as a theoretically infinite series of attachments— verandas, porches, storage areas, dormers, platforms, or treehouses. Except, of course, that there is no question here of duration, of years of sedimentation, nor of the naivety or spontaneity they are based upon— this is a house designed, within a few weeks, by one single architect. The same contradictions and tensions that are present in the materials of the house (concrete combined with wood) and in its spatial organization (the community life of a family taken apart and reassembled in one and the same gesture) manifest themselves in the way the architect deals with his authorship, by providing a dominant, clawlike, geometrical structure, and by then fragmenting, dividing, and refining it.

And yet, once more, this is a detached, individual, and unique house, built during the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s, in a country, in a territory, in a culture, that is being stuffed with detached, individual, and unique houses. Beauty— as a coherent, reasoned combination of qualities that supplement and strengthen each other, no matter how conflicting they are— in such an environment is only possible when zooming in; at any scale beyond the single house, it pulverizes. There is a remarkable aerial photograph taken immediately after the completion of House Botte, at the beginning of the 1970s, showing the landscape between the river Dyle below and one of its straight channels at the top in an early state of suburbanization. One or two farmhouses are there, probably from the beginning of the twentieth century or from the immediate postwar period, as well as, along the riverbank, one row of about seven small workers' houses— anything but firm, brittle, and a little crooked. And then other houses are being constructed: on one plot, a scraping crane is making the ground ready for construction; one house is awaiting doors and windows; another one— with a smooth, spotless tiled roof— is still very new. House Botte looks different from the others, but in this picture it would be far- fetched to call it beautiful. In the years that followed, through today, houses have been continuously added on every possible piece of land (or almost, because the planning hasn't been *methodical)— except in the zone starting at the end of the street, which has been preserved as a flood control area.*

The conundrum posed by a national situation in which a few architects try to excel in building beautiful Belgian houses, while the majority of houses are actually built for, and inhabited by, people who couldn't care less (or who, often, are annoyed by those strange experiments), has not been brought to light better— and not without derision and ridicule— than by another architect, Luc Deleu, a contemporary of Van Reeth. In 1963, when both men had only recently embarked on their studies, the Belgian Order of Architects was founded: from that moment onward, anyone who has wanted to practice the profession of architect in Belgium has had no other option but to be a member. It also means that it is mandatory to call on an architect for every kind of construction that exceeds a certain size. Every building plan of every new house, regardless of its size, has to be signed officially by an architect. This means that nonarchitects cannot design and build their own house, even when they would be perfectly capable of doing so, if only with a little help from their friends. In 1979, Deleu actively went looking for these do-it- yourselfers, supposedly because he was interested in what they wanted, which kind of house they dreamt of, how they reasoned, and how they designed. He also, however, agreed to subsequently sign their plans, asking in return not a percentage of the total building costs, but a small fee, mainly for administrative reasons, that would amount today to 75 euros. This practice went on for a while, quite successfully (it became widely known that Deleu could be contacted when you needed nothing but the signature of an architect, without interference or a high price), until he was, in 1981, officially accused by the Order of Architects of "name lending" for about a hundred houses, and thus for violating regulations. Deleu was asked to make a report, which he published in 1983 as a book, Manifesto to the Order, and materialized in an upright model. He also documented and photographed the houses in question, arguing that he had "internalized" the principles behind all of them, and that in this process, the designs did become his.

Deleu's démarche has mostly been interpreted as a piece of institutional critique, directed against the Order of Architects, and as a plea for individualism: people should be free to build whatever they want, no one has the right to judge, and no higher power should meddle— if it makes the residents happy, it can't be

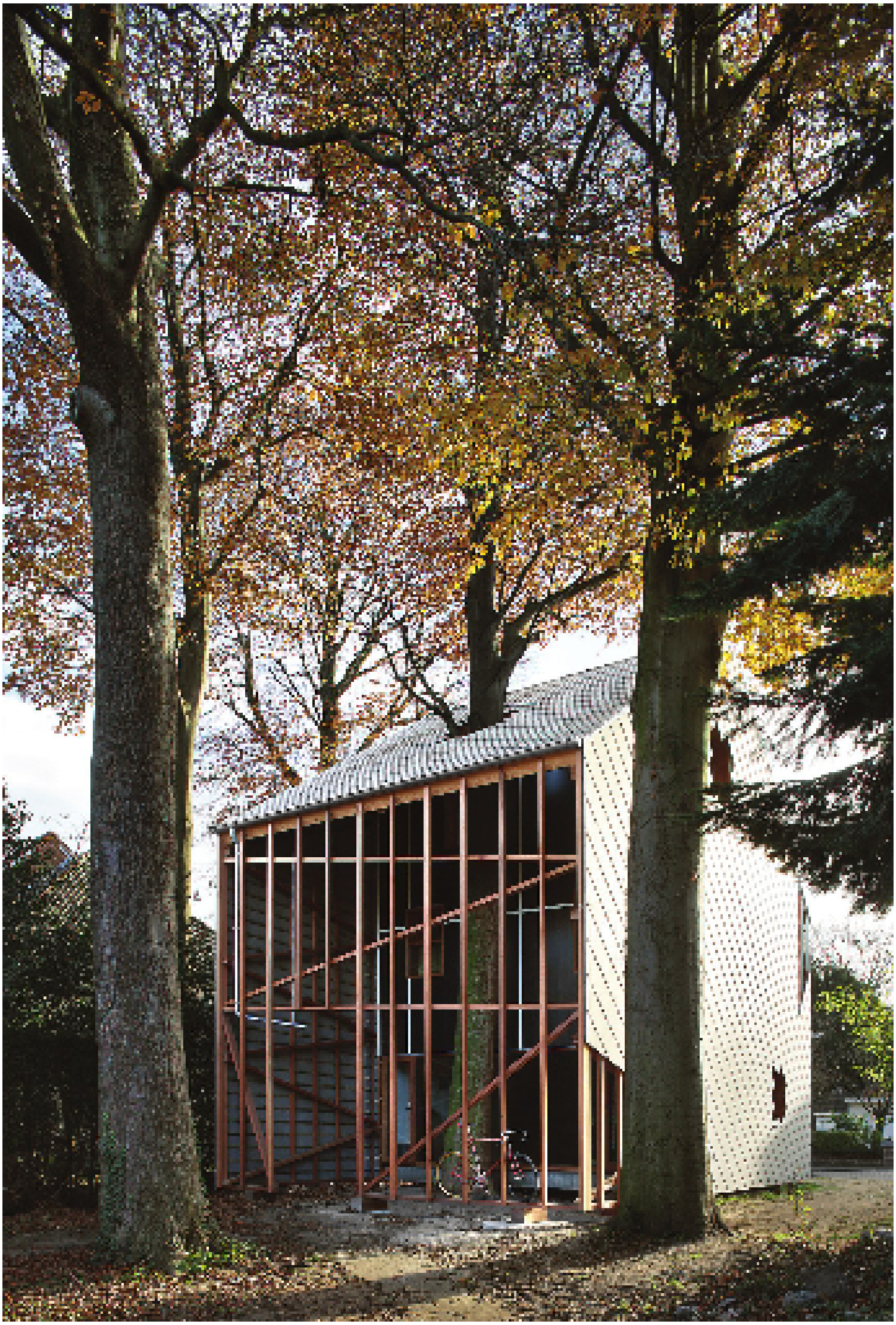


OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen, Villa Buggenhout, 2013. Photograph by Bas Princen.

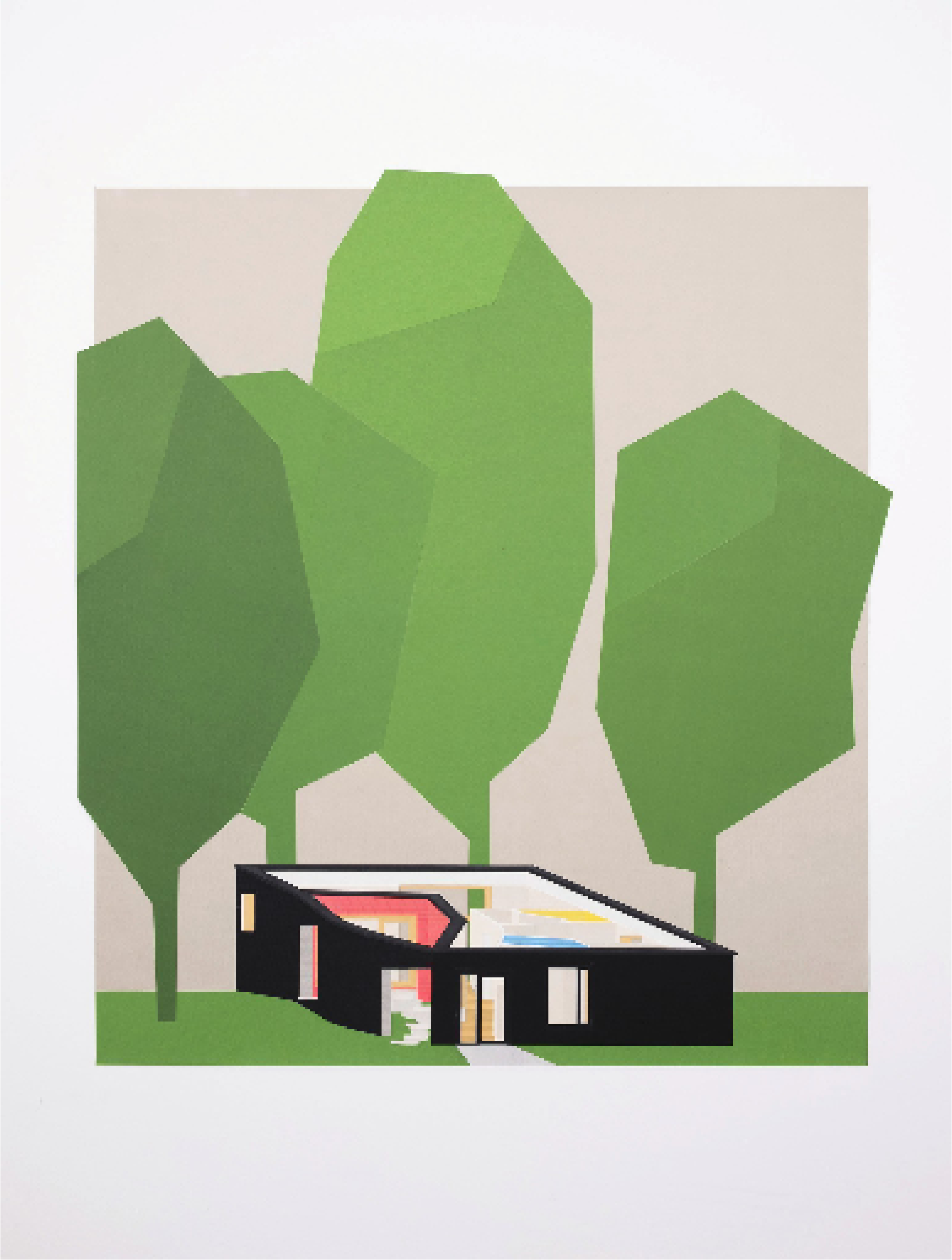
that bad. But his actions leave enough space for other implications and interpretations. The very idea of an Order of Architects is, all things considered, not that bad: if such an institution functioned well, it might be—theoretically—a cure for the ugliness of an entire country. If everything new being built was really designed by professionally schooled, serious, and competent architects, who invest the time to explain to their clients everything they need to know about good and beautiful architecture, wouldn't that justify the existence of a professional association? Viewed in this way, Deleu— who also built some houses over the years based on his own designs, which can be considered as Eisenmanesque conversations with the oeuvre of Le Corbusier— criticized his colleagues for not doing their job, paradoxically because they were doing what he was doing himself (signing other people's plans), with the significant difference that they were asking a lot of money to do so. Most architects in Belgium exist, function, and thrive by literally doing what other people could do all by themselves: they are being paid not only for being superfluous but also for maintaining a self- serving fraud. The 1982 Manifesto to the Order is therefore a more ironic follow-up to Braem's The Ugliest Country in the World from 1968, although it is also less biased, and— one could argue— more successful. Having learned from American artworks dealing with popular or vernacular architecture (and the regulations or corporations facilitating them), such as Dan Graham's 1966 Homes for America or Ed Ruscha's 1970 Real Estate Opportunities, Deleu was able to do more than expose the absurdities of a national system (and of architecture itself); he also succeeded in accomplishing shades of beauty— conceptual, philosophical, critical, slightly wicked, but also formal in nature, thanks to the grid-like presentation of the photographed houses—that were out of range for well-meaning colleagues like Neefs and Van Reeth, who were still, probably at times against their better judgment, trying to build beautiful houses.

There are hundreds of other architects who have done so since, exaggerating and exalting the almost impossible relationship of a building with a context in which more and more codes and continuities have increasingly interfered with each other, without the possibility, more or less since the turn of the century, of indicating one dominant conception of architectural beauty or of domestic living. The slick modern villa is now as popular and as present as the pseudo-farm, and just as in other areas of life, the economy has fragmented and specialized to suit everyone's taste, and to keep production as high as possible. A recent example of a detached house that deals with this situation of atomization and diversification was completed by OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen in 2012: it is a freestanding dwelling on a parcel located between woods and an agricultural area, near the village of Buggenhout, about thirty kilometers north of Brussels. An aphorism from Philip Johnson that has been applied by Joan Ockman to OFFICe's approach— "A view without a frame seems impossible after the seventeenth century"— can easily be extended to this intervention within Belgian sprawl: "A house without a frame seems impossible after the twentieth century."[26] OFFICe takes the spatial conditions of this house— and, therefore, of a large part of Belgium— to the letter, as the starting point of an exercise in inversion, isolation, and insulation.

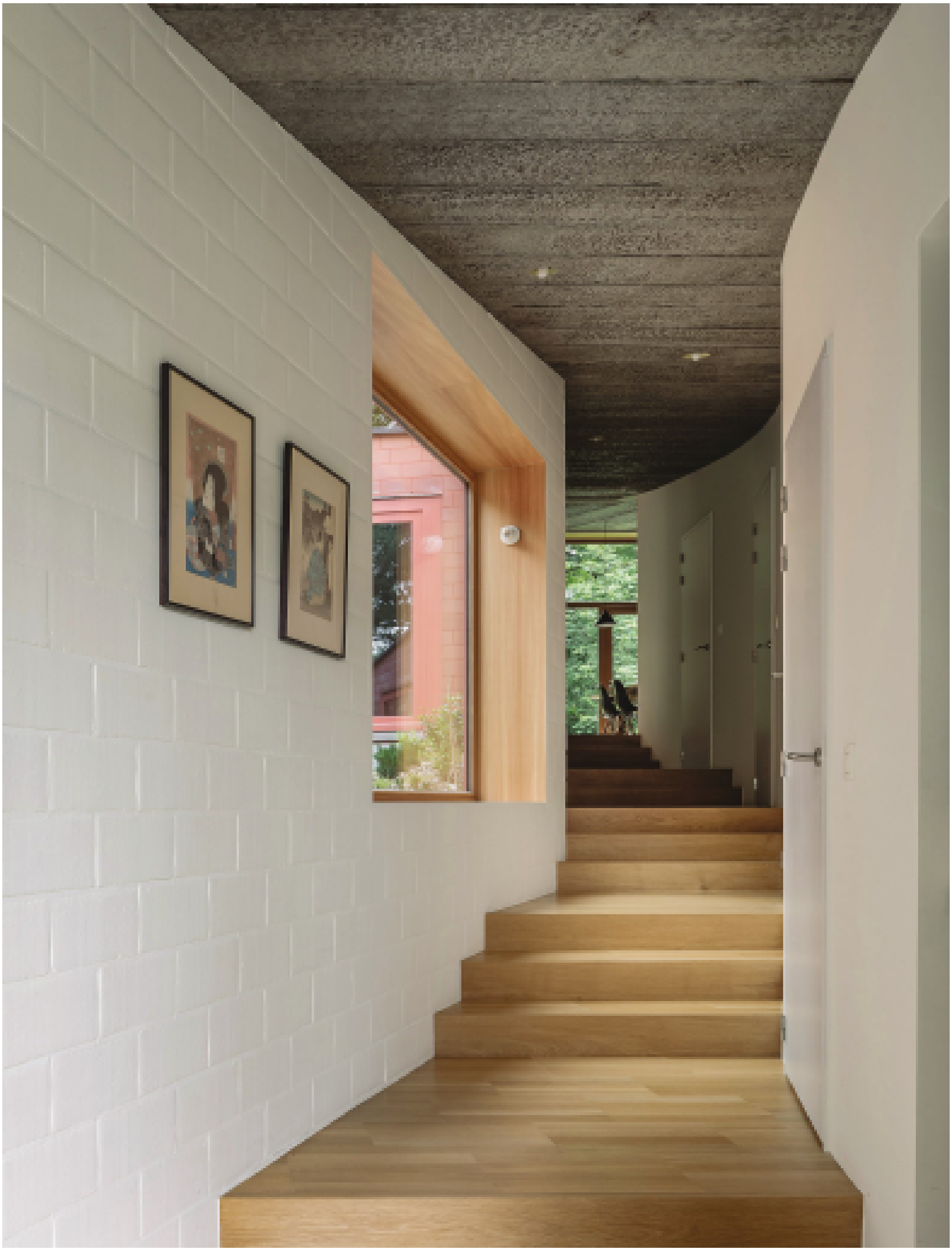
The parcel is similar in size and form to the parcel on which Paul Neefs built a house for Leo Pleysier in 1970, but this piece of land, just like the surrounding landscape, can no longer influence or inspire the architecture— not even on a purely geometric level. This is a contextual building, but only conceptually so: the context it responds to has been created— another instance of DIY, perhaps— by the architects themselves. They decided to absolutize the rule that imposes four meters from the boundary with the neighboring plot, by materializing this perimeter as a fence of steel frames, covered with ivy. The resulting rectangle of thirteen by twenty- nine meters becomes the new, actual plot, but also the outer wall, to the left and to the right, of the house itself. What happens inside showcases a wealth of compositional possibilities from the history of architecture, as if to parody but also to live up to the idea of the good life suburbia promises: a nine- square plan is the basis of an open pavilion in a park, while the house turns into a kind of villa that, from the second floor, offers masterful views of the enclosed garden and of the immediate environment. The central stair, in the middle square, is lit by a skylight above, turning the building into yet another domestic type: the patio villa. And while the ground- floor walls are made out of bricks, painted white, the second floor is made of wood, wrapped in a black waterproof membrane, that seems to reveal, and to revel in, the added value of these bedrooms, as an extension in another material (not untypical in this domestic landscape) to a house that can now breathe, thanks to all of the extra space upstairs. The strip of four meters



Architecten de vylder vinck taillieu, Bern heim beuk, Ghent, 2011. Photograph by Filip Dujardin.



Bovenbouw, Weekend House, Bazel, 2019, collage.



Bovenbouw, Weekend House, Bazel, 2019, interior. Photograph by Stijn Bollaert.

around the house, ostensibly lost, is allowed to be overgrown, but also serves as a driveway—revealing but also inverting, as if a scene in Belgica Deserta, the “nature” of that part of the territory that is not domestically privatized, but simply used, often by means of asphalt and concrete, as generic infrastructure.

OFFICe’s singular addition to Belgium’s army of detached houses could be a kind of prototype: it doesn’t overthrow the rules of the game (because then no building permit would be issued), but shows how all these regulations and traditions can, in the hands of qualified architects, yield unforeseen qualities—and there never is beauty without at least some kind of surprise. As in Deleu’s Manifesto to the Order, the deadpan aesthetic of Ed Ruscha is here too, used differently, as well as the critical approach of Dan Graham’s Alteration to a Suburban House, for example, from 1978—although the utopian aim of transparency (and of glass facades) is replaced by the realist and truthful realization of the opacity of privacy.

It’s probably obvious that the house in Buggenhout will never be selected for inclusion in a new set of Ugly Belgian Houses— it’s simply too simple (at least from the outside) and too withdrawn, and its symmetry is embedded in a universal unconsciousness as a classic marker for beauty. One office whose projects do seem candidates for ending up in that popular collection is that of Jan De Vylder, Inge Vinck, and Jo Taillieu. Whereas OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen render visible the hidden abstractions that rule Belgian housing, De Vylder Vinck Taillieu exalt in the surface that hides those abstractions, while in some cases the abstraction can dissolve under the weight of materials, ad hoc solutions, or deviations from the rule. Instead of trying to heighten contrast with the built- up country their buildings end up in, they appropriate nearly everything that presents itself. It is not surprising that Kersten Geers has understood this, writing that in the work of his colleagues, “the context itself becomes the project, or at least part of the project. If the context is redrawn, it is transformed and taken over.”[27]

Emblematic of this is the project called bern heim beuk from 2011, where a large existing tree becomes part of a house—not inside a patio, but as a brutal interruption. It is as if the house was there first, and the tree grew through it, breaching the roof. At the same time, the main structural element of the house is a concrete column with beams as branches, modelled on the existing tree. Bern heim beuk was built in a suburb of the city of Ghent, in an allotment from the 1970s that, for once, doesn't consist of detached houses but has groups of rowhouses— from two to at most nine or ten— that make up a large semicircle. For unclear reasons, the two lots at the beginning of the street remained empty, except for three trees that were allowed to grow unhindered for decades. When De Vylder Vinck Taillieu were approached to design one house on the left part of the terrain, it was clear that its size, its envelope, and its dimensions were already fixed by building regulations. In a decision that recalls the retreat by OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen in Buggenhout, they conceived of a smaller house, both within the larger volume imposed by the masterplan of the allotment and within the client's budget. With the exception of the front and rear facades, the exterior of the house is completely clad in gray diamond-shaped slates made out of fiber cement— the building element that is traditionally used in Belgium for temporarily coating the blind "waiting facades" of semidetached or terraced houses that await the building, in the near future, of the neighbor's house. And yet the facades, facing the street and the garden, seem equally precarious or provisional, as whimsical grids of wooden slats, looking like an homage to the non- facade Frank O. Gehry erected as his contribution to the Strada Novissima at the Venice Architecture Biennale of 1980.

Is this then, finally, the primes inter pares— the ugly Belgian house that is so ugly it becomes a masterpiece? In a contribution to the 2020 book Architecture and Ugliness, philosopher Bart Verschaffel has charted the characteristics of the houses that are deemed worthy of that popular epithet. In some cases, he writes, these "structures are so slapdash and lacking in form that they cannot even be called banal"; "like an unwashed and disheveled man who strolls down the street in his pajamas, the ugly building stands out." But the opposite can also be true, in the case of "buildings that have had too much care lavished upon them and are trying too hard to be beautiful. Exaggerated forms, a riot of color or an excess of ornamentation can make a building seem kitschy or vulgar." Another "group of ugly buildings are the mistakes and failed jokes," while "a fourth group mainly suffers from a problem of scale": these houses are "either too big or too small, ginormous or diminutive, deformed or misshapen."28 Bern heim beuk shares a bit of all those qualities: it does stand out in this boring, respectable street (even more so since the house on the right was completed in 2016); it is an exaggeration, if only because of the uniform *coat it is wearing; a house that gobbles an existing tree, while also copying it in the form of a concrete structure, must be a joke; and while prescriptions concerning scale and size were obeyed, the outer shell is clearly too big for the inhabited house inside. This project by De Vylder Vinck Taillieu, therefore, increases all the tensions related to architecture, the ugliness of Belgium, and the absurdity of detached houses and their endless repetition, until it reaches a kind paroxysm, as an almost unbearable intensification of symptoms that have been manifesting themselves for half a century. And yet it is also very ordinary: a house to live in, and in which to find— or to wait for— moments of beauty.*

Who will receive that beauty, when it arrives, is yet another question. A third house from the twenty-first century can be added to the two previous examples, both because it taps into another reservoir of suburban strategies and because it revels in the fictional isolation that every freestanding, single house pursues. In 2019, Bovenbouw built a relatively small one-story house in the park of an old castle, some twenty kilometers from Antwerp, that was parceled out after the war. Tall old trees compose the backdrop in which the house is set, almost completely obscuring the neighbors, which— at least in cleverly framed photos, or in a collage with a remarkable sense of depth— can create an impression that is, for Belgium, unusually pastoral.

Because the plot slopes toward the river Scheldt nearby, the flat roof becomes a fifth facade, as a surface that determines the appearance of the house, with a patio on the left, a pinkish-green roof in the middle, and a strip of solar panels on the right. A central, curved corridor climbs through the house, along steps and small platforms. The walls are made of brick, but they consist of several layers; colors and patterns alternate, while the exterior is painted black. The result resembles a large piece of chocolate, with a corner broken off to reveal a surprising filling. Next to the left facade, a part of the building volume has been cut away, creating a wedge-shaped walled garden, which is also accessible from the street along a path. The resulting patio is like a miniature version of the house, but without a roof. The inner walls have the natural color of red brick, while the edges of openings in the thick black wall are colored light beige, again creating the impression that there is a massive outer wall firmly protecting the house.

And then, finally, there are the windows—notoriously difficult in this context and situation, because the view to the outside is *in most cases better left unseen, while looking in is something to avoid too, within Belgian domestic culture. The picture window, typical of American and Dutch houses—a wide window that cannot be opened, with a narrow frame that makes the landscape look like a painting, while framing the domestic interior in the other direction— does not occur in Belgium, if only because windows are reflexively adorned with glass curtains. In this bungalow, there are nevertheless several picture windows, such as in the living room, overlooking a few of those towering trees, or in the courtyard, where a large opening, without glass or frame, opens onto the dense, green wall that delimits the plot. The best view seems to bring the Scheldt closer: it's somewhere over there, in the distance, as seen from the living room, through the inner garden, above the edge of the house, and in between all the trees. It discloses and maintains the fiction of the beautiful house in an allotment: to be surrounded by nothing but natural landscape, with not a soul in sight.*

3 *The Tenement of the Purest Form*

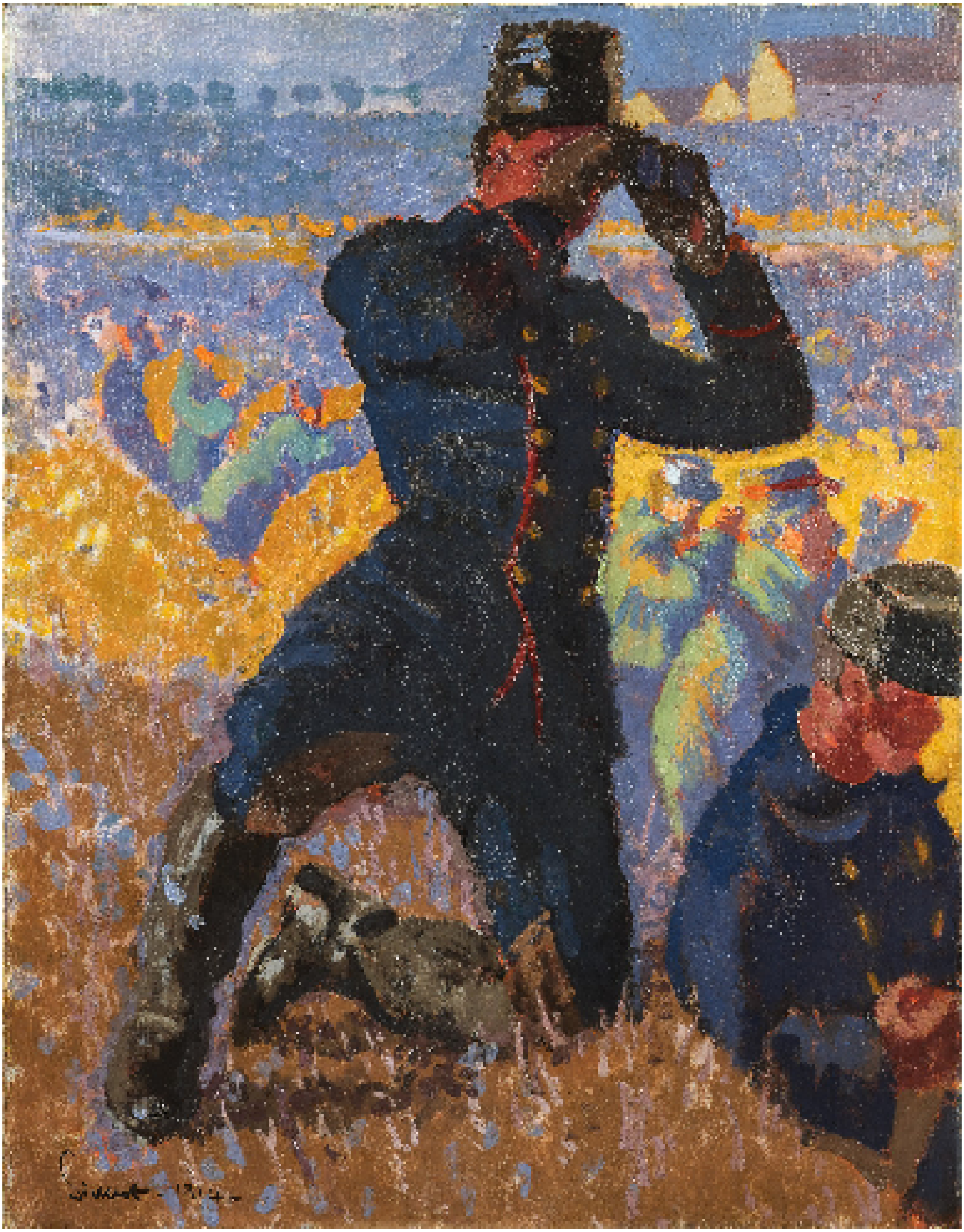
In the summer of 1914, Marguerite Yourcenar, born in 1903 in Brussels, was staying with her father at the seaside when the First World War broke out. She later recalled:

> Was it on that morning or the next that we heard the alarm bells of war pealing out across the countryside, from the villages of French Flanders to those of Belgian Flanders, like a kind of sonorous epidemic? What prevailed over all was the vast magma of fear and spinelessness that always appears on the eve of catastrophes. People hunched over their morning newspaper, cup of coffee in hand, avidly drank in that news, just as people today soak up the news that streams from the media concerning the atomic bomb or the pollution that will someday kill them. . . . One fact, though, was comforting: huge steel monsters loomed in the August mist a few yards offshore. There was a feeling of security—England was watching over us. It didn't occur to anyone that when the first vanguard of German troops arrived, the entire coast would be trapped in the crossfire.[1]

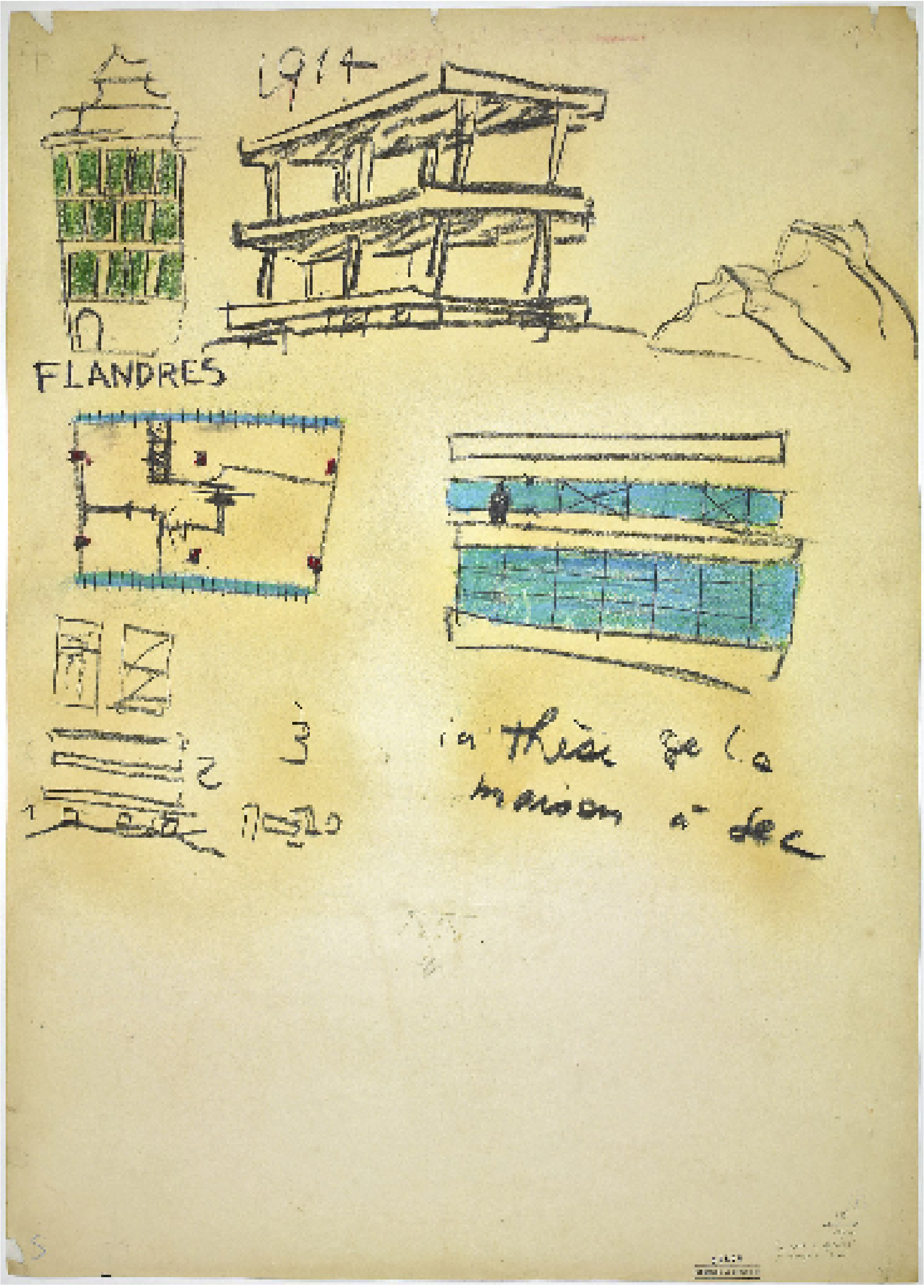
Following increasing conflicts between the European power blocks, Germany wanted to attack France, and requested a hassle-free passage through Belgium. King Albert I couldn't allow that, *despite the disadvantage of his troops, and on August 4, soldiers crossed the border near Aachen. Whether the crimes committed by the Germans— "obsessed by the goal of 'intimidating' the Belgians into giving up their stupid and futile resistance,"2 as Barbara Tuchman wrote— were exaggerated in the foreign press, in a period when almost the entire world seemed to fall prey to propaganda, nationalism, and polarization, remains a point of contention among historians. In 1918 American artist George Bellows made his War Series, consisting of five paintings, and the largest works he ever completed. Horrifically realistic canvases such as Massacre at Dinant, The Barricade, and The Germans Arrive portrayed the invaders acting as barbarians on Belgian soil: it was the artist's intention to visually urge the United States to interfere more aggressively in the war.3 A more nuanced rendering, depicting the patriotic but futile and not very surefooted resistance of the Belgian army, can be found in two paintings made in 1914 by the German- born British artist Walter Richard Sickert, who was living in northern France when the war broke out: Soldiers of King Albert at the Ready and The Integrity of Belgium.*

These images were also produced to convince the British to help the poor Belgians, and Sickert put a lot of effort into making lifelike paintings, even borrowing uniforms from wounded soldiers in a hospital. "One has a kind of distaste for using misfortunes to further one's own ends," he wrote in a letter, objecting that "if military painters had always been too bloody delicate, they would never have got anything done at all."4

In The Integrity of Belgium, the landscape is light: the war started at the height of the summer, and the crops are either titian and sun- dappled, or pastel blue, reflecting the airspace soon to be involved in the war. However, the kneeling soldier in the center of the painting is completely shrouded in shadows; in his gloved hands he holds binoculars, trying to figure out what will happen, and like almost everyone else at that moment, possibly assuming that the war will be over soon. There are a few small buildings in the top right corner, almost the same, curiously enough, as in Bellows's Belgian paintings four years later: single, pale, lonely houses— very modest farms— with a gabled roof or a stepped gable. During the First World War, about 25,000 homes and other buildings in Belgium were destroyed. The most well- known example was the burning of the University Library of the Catholic University of Leuven, leading to the destruction of 230,000 books.5



Walter Richard Sickert, The Integrity of Belgium, 1914. Crown Copyright, UK Government Art Collection.


1914
FLANDRES
1
2
3
1930
la thèse de la maison à sec

Le Corbusier, Flandres 1914, 1930. Fondation Le Corbusier / ProLitteris, Zurich, 2022.

Together with the cost of lives and the 1.5 million Belgians fleeing from the invading army, this destruction brought about immense pity in the Western World.[6]

One architect who didn’t remain unmoved was Le Corbusier. He was, however, among those who welcomed the war because of the electroshocks it could give to a European culture and architecture that had run out of steam— or, rather, that was not able to adapt and innovate using the possibilities offered by technological innovations and the Industrial Revolution. “We are at a turning point for architecture,” he wrote in a letter on September 15, 1914. “The engineers have done everything . . . but the shoulder bump is given in 1914.”[7] He conceived his Maison Dom-ino between 1914 and 1915 to help reconstruct Belgium and Flanders, but it was also inspired, according to the architect’s account, by vernacular buildings from that region. Maison Dom-ino is considered Le Corbusier’s prototype for all modern and industrialized architecture: a model, not unlike Marc-Antoine Laugier’s cabane primitive from 1755, that could liberate architecture (and housing in particular) from all redundancies, could be repeated ad infinitum, and was easy and cheap to construct. Its name alludes to domus, the Latin word for house, but also to the tile-based game commonly known as dominoes—not because of the toppling during a domino run, but because the units can be realigned and combined differently. Each unit consists of three concrete parallel slabs supported by a few perpendicular columns, raised from the ground on six equidistant footings, and with a set of stairs on one side of the open floor plan. “Two engineers, Max Du Bois and Juste Schneider were responsible for finding the method of construction and making the necessary calculations,” as Eleanor Gregh has brought to light.[8] The architect did his best to disguise their input; this is how he looked back in 1930 on his invention, in the book Précisions sur un état présent de l’architecture et de l’urbanisme:

> At the moment of the first destructions in Flanders in 1914, I had had a sort of clairvoyant vision of the problems of contemporary housing. . . . Reconstruction would not take longer than six months. After which, life would go back to normal! . . . I study the famous old houses of the architecture of Flanders; I draw them schematically; I discover that they are glass houses: fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth century. Then I imagine this: a construction firm will pour, without

> *formwork but by means of ingenious site machinery, the framework of a house of six columns, three floor slabs, and the staircase. The dimensions: 6 x 9 meters. . . . I tried innumerable combinations of plans within these structural frameworks. Everything was possible.*[9]

The reference to "the famous old houses of the architecture of Flanders"— turning Maison Dom- ino into a site- specific intervention—is somewhat puzzling. Le Corbusier studied the history of European cities when he was working on an unpublished treatise entitled La Construction des villes in the years leading up to the war.[10] *Equally, in Précisions from 1930, he wrote about his "prosaic affirmation" that (his emphasis) "architecture consists of lighted floors," giving of course an enormous importance to windows, or rather to glazed facades.*[11] *The façade libre is a principle that he claims to have discovered in the history of premodern, vernacular architecture in Flanders: "when the Middle Ages built their little wooden houses overhanging the narrow streets, they glazed all they could, using all the resources of wood. And this was even so convincing that the skillful Flemish of Ghent, of Leuven, of the Grande Place of Brussels, on the basis of that tradition, made the miraculous glass façades with stone stiles that we still admire."*[12] *Like most architects, Le Corbusier was a rather unreliable historian, cherry-picking the past. It is true that in the Low Countries— present-day Belgium and the Netherlands— prior to the fifteenth century, a type of house can be discerned, with a skeleton in wood and with modulated rooms.*[13] *The parcels on which they were built were narrow and deep; the facade facing the street and the framework that punctuated the depth of the building consisted of spans of approximately 1.25 and 2.5 meters. These houses were, however, terraced: they stood next to each other in a row, so that only the narrow facade (and not the very long side walls) could be glazed. Specimens of this type can be perceived in the Annunciation scene of the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, completed in 1432 by the brothers Van Eyck, and showing "a street composed entirely of distinctly individual houses, each with its own ridge roof," as Francis Strauven has described it.*[14] *The wall, though maligned by Le Corbusier, was an indispensable, curtailing, and determining element in this kind of house: the adjoining walls, as well as the numerous solid parts of the facades, were filled, in between the wooden frame, with clay and lime. For safety reasons, this filling was replaced* *from the sixteenth century onward by brick, and then abandoned in favor of a party wall, shared by two adjacent houses, in masonry. Spiral stairs were positioned in between the beams, placed in a separate volume outside at the back, or built in an elongated corridor on the left or right side of the parcel.*

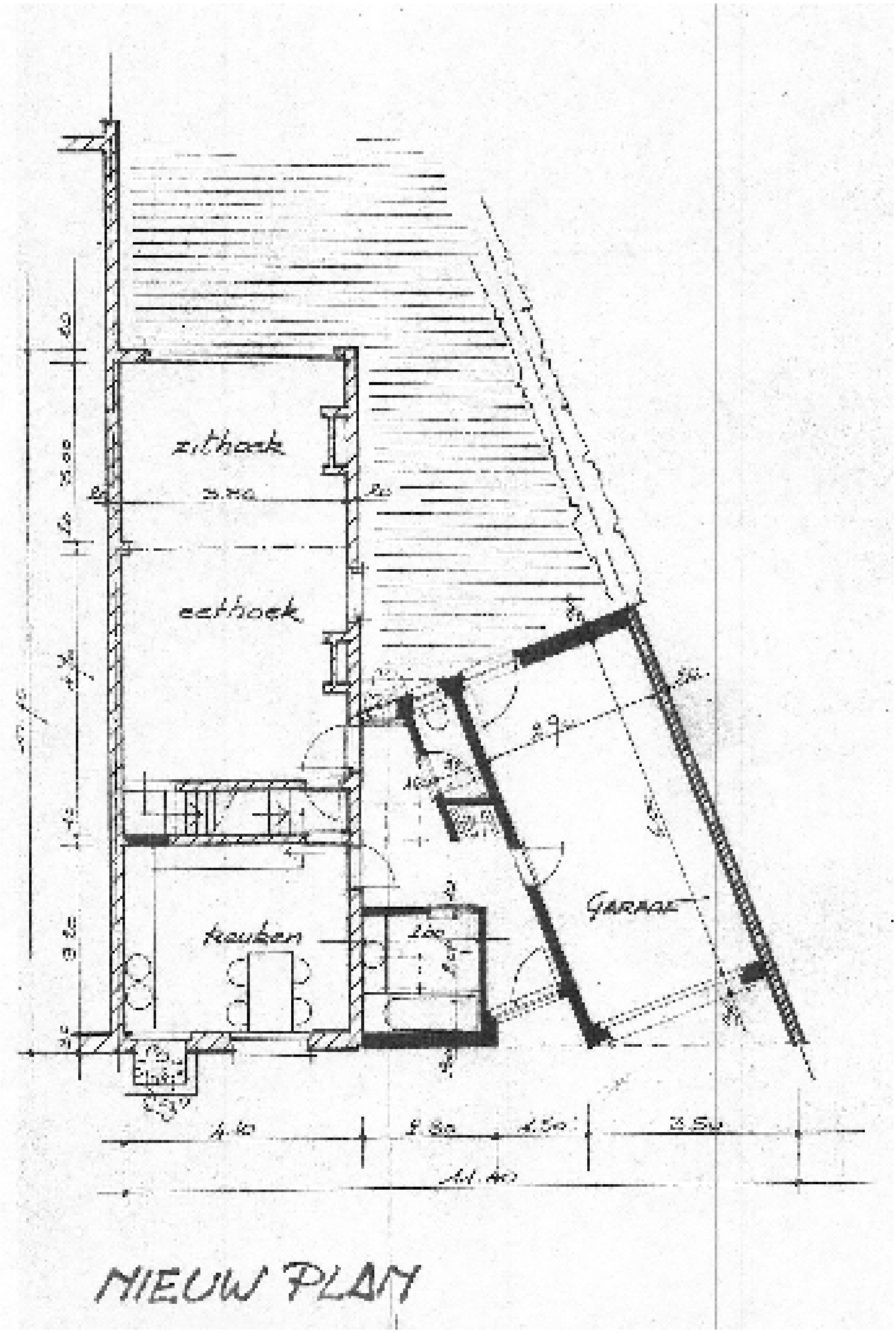
This "Belgian house" in brick, as it has also been typified by Jean Castex, became the building block of cities from the nineteenth century onward.15 A suite of two or three adjoining rooms is bordered by a corridor leading to the kitchen. On the mezzanine, at the top of the first flight of stairs, there is sometimes a bathroom; on the second floor, on the side of the street, a room has the width of the facade, and one or two smaller rooms are located at the back. A third, identical floor follows, with an attic on top under a gable roof. A smaller, proletarian version of this bourgeois house, with lower and fewer floors, would be deployed for the piecemeal suburbanization of the countryside, where "the rowhouse stands along the arterial roads out of cities and villages . . . as one of the effects of the Industrial Revolution," in the words of Wim Cuyvers. In these more peripheral cases, the closed side wall was often not shared at all: as a "waiting facade," it was "standing there, as an uninterrupted surface of red bricks, waiting until the next Belgian decides to build his house against it." Therefore, Cuyvers suggested, "the evident, banal waiting facades are the quintessence of the Belgian house."16

I can attest to that: I grew up in a suburban house, built in 1930 by my great- grandparents, at the very end of a row, along an extremely long and straight road leading out of the provincial city of Sint- Niklaas, all the way up to the border with the Netherlands, further north— during my childhood, cars drove by, fast and numerous. The wall to the left was shared with the rowhouse of our neighbors; the wall to the right wasn't shared, simply because this was where the allotment ended; a little bit further, the next one began, with detached instead of serried houses. The entire row occupied one field on which flax had been grown, until the first decade of the twentieth century. In the early 1980s, my parents seized the opportunity, with the help of local architect Johan de Moyer, to extend the narrow house with a volume of one floor, containing a garage, a bathroom, a corridor, and a more representative front door. The design wasn't without merits: because the extension followed the sloping boundary of the plot, it was possible, from the living room, via a line of sight that ran through the *corridor, to see, unobtrusively, who had pressed the bell at the glass front door.*

Sharing a wall with our neighbors wasn't always easy, mainly due to acoustics: often, we could hear them running down the stairs, while the father of the family banged menacingly on the wall when the music I was listening to was too loud. We regularly met them in our backyard, which had approximately the same area as the house itself. The two yards were hardly separated, and only a medium- high, completely transparent fence in green metal wire marked the boundary. As the century drew to a close, the neighbor—a construction worker who continuously embellished and adjusted his own house on weekends— decided to raise and reinforce that outdoor partition, first by means of stone slabs, which were later covered with wooden slats. My parents didn't object, and so the common wall was doubled in length and extended outside.

Apart from its variations over the centuries, the type of the Belgian rowhouse seems unlikely as an inspiration for Maison Domino: it's dark, narrow, elongated, isolated, sequestered, built by hand from outdated materials and without prefabrication, and in many ways, it is the opposite of an architecture of lighted floors. Of course, for Le Corbusier, the reference to the genius loci embodied by a historical building type would have served as a rhetorical argument to convince Belgium to tackle the reconstruction with his help. He succeeded in meeting members of the Belgian government, and continued to present the project until 1916, but mainly because the war dragged on, application, on whichever scale, never came to fruition.17 It has been suggested that Maison Guiette in Antwerp, the only built work of Le Corbusier in Belgium (aside from the demolished Philips Pavilion at Expo 58, which he designed in collaboration with Iannis Xenakis), was an application of the Dom- ino principle.18 But that is only true if many ambitions of the 1914 project are disregarded, as well as the organizational principle and the circulation pattern, which are, in the house completed in 1926, closer to the Citrohan type. In fact, Maison Guiette, just like the less canonical and much smaller construction I grew up in, is demarcated by a blind wall to the left, against which another house was built much later, in 1993, designed by Georges Baines, who also renovated Le Corbusier's Belgian house in 1987.

The real significance of Maison Domino lies not in its direct application, or in the way it was or wasn't built, but in its ideal,


zithoek
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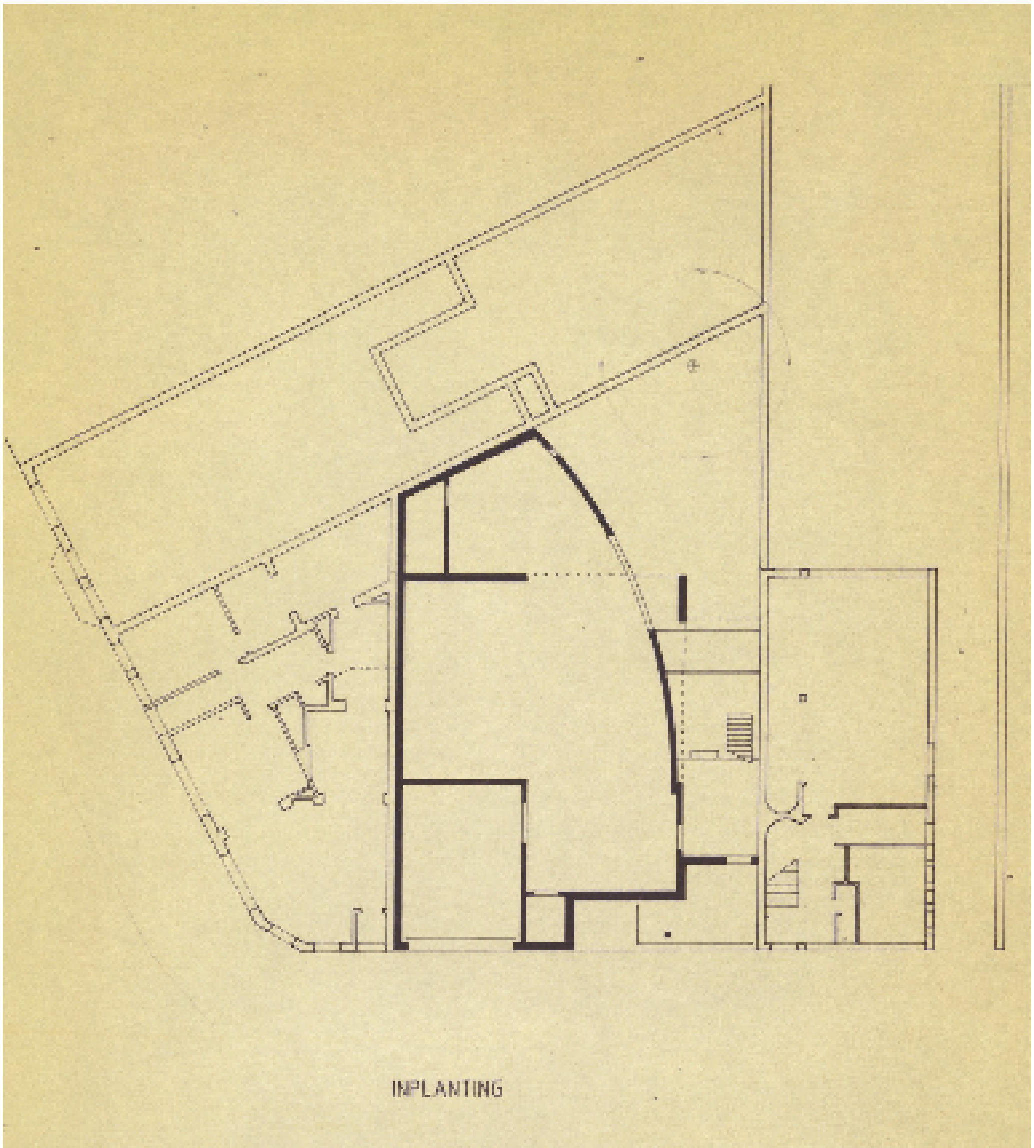
NIEUW PLAN

Johan de Moyer, House Van Gerrewey– Coene, Sint- Niklaas, 1982.



Georges Baines, House Demeulemeester-Robyn, extension Maison Guiette, Antwerp, 1993.
Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.

Platonic, and allegorical character. While it seems plausible that Maison Dom-ino played no part whatsoever in the reconstruction of Belgium, the opposite can also be argued, simply because Le Corbusier’s prototype was a prefiguration of the twentieth-century building industry. Maison Dom-ino was, on the one hand, unfeasible on a technical level, while it predicted and symbolized, on the other hand, the future of industrialized building production, and therefore also eliminated the necessity and the authorship of the architect. “As a partly fictional entity that occupies an almost impossible position between the nonarchitectural and the architectural, as if the two regimes were actually compatible,” to use Antoine Picon’s description, Maison Dom-ino did show how the housing shortage after the war, and the problem of housing in general, could be solved. Le Corbusier’s miscalculation consisted in thinking that this undertaking would require his participation, or that of architects in general. As Picon wrote: “What could save architecture in an industrial world in which mass production was becoming an economic necessity was also what could kill architecture itself if improperly used.”[19]

Rather than being influenced by the historical type of the Belgian rowhouse, the Maison Dom-ino can be considered as its precursor, symbolizing the beginning of Belgium’s sprawling and proliferating combination of urbanization and suburbanization. Within the country’s endeavor to secure a house for every family, if not to reduce the meaning of life to that quest, two building types have filled up the Belgian territory during the twentieth century: the detached house, as a mixture of a villa and a farm; and the rowhouse, with two shared walls or with one waiting facade, and sometimes even two—the pinnacle of architectural loneliness. And yet, for these types, the Maison Dom-ino also set the bar too high, not only because they remain dependent on traditional, nonserial construction methods, but also because they are not that suitable for combination and concatenation: they can be placed next to each other, or at some distance, but that’s about it. This is exactly why they do lend themselves to architectural expression, invention, or singularity—and thus to architecture tout court. Belgian architects have manifested themselves, or have defined their profession, by means of individual houses, single or in a row. The most canonical examples, produced by a fin-de-siècle avant-garde, are Hôtel Tassel, a bourgeois rowhouse in Brussels completed in 1893 by Victor Horta, and Villa Bloemenwerf, the residence of Henry Van de Velde, built in 1895, in a suburb of Brussels. These two buildings have foreshadowed how Belgians came to live, but they were also a blueprint for architectural excellence. For architects, meeting the housing needs of their compatriots meant either creatively varying the organization of family life in between two parallel dead walls (often by experimenting with the position of the stairs) or providing an idyllic, pavilion- like construction surrounded by open space. Both types were serialized, but in such a modest way that enough freedom was left for the architect to create forms of architectonic beauty, also thanks to artisanal construction and detailing.

If Maison Dom-ino was too advanced, from a technological point of view, compared to the traditional Belgian house, the opposite can also be argued: the formal and conceptual similarities between Maison Dom-ino and the rowhouse and the detached house— two types with origins in medieval cities or agrarian societies—reveal the limited nature of Le Corbusier's invention. As a banal single house with two floors, it can in that sense (and despite its construction in concrete) seem old-fashioned and even antiquated, or at least not absolutely modern. To make the building trenchantly rational and efficient, and to house truly large numbers of people in the cheapest possible way, wouldn't it be obvious to stack the dominoes, rather than to place them side by side? Doesn't an architecture of lighted floors start making sense as soon as a multitude of stories can be realized, exposed to the air, in a large building unobstructed by neighbors? It was in Belgium that Le Corbusier came to realize this, or it's at least in Brussels that he expressed similar insights, more than a decade after the end of the war, in 1930, when the housing shortage had only worsened. This time, he was no longer promoting the Maison Dom-ino but advocating for the Ville Radieuse, characterized by a grid of skyscrapers and a functionalist separation.

In 1929, the topic of the second meeting of CIAM in Frankfurt had been the minimum dwelling or "Die Wohnung für das Existenzminimum"; the conference had opened on October 24, known as Black Thursday because of the stock market crash in New York, inaugurating the severe economic depression of the 1930s.[20] This second edition of CIAM was aptly summarized by Sigfried Giedion: "The most difficult task for contemporary construction, housing for people with the smallest incomes, is still unresolved today."[21] When one year later, in 1930, the third CIAM was organized by

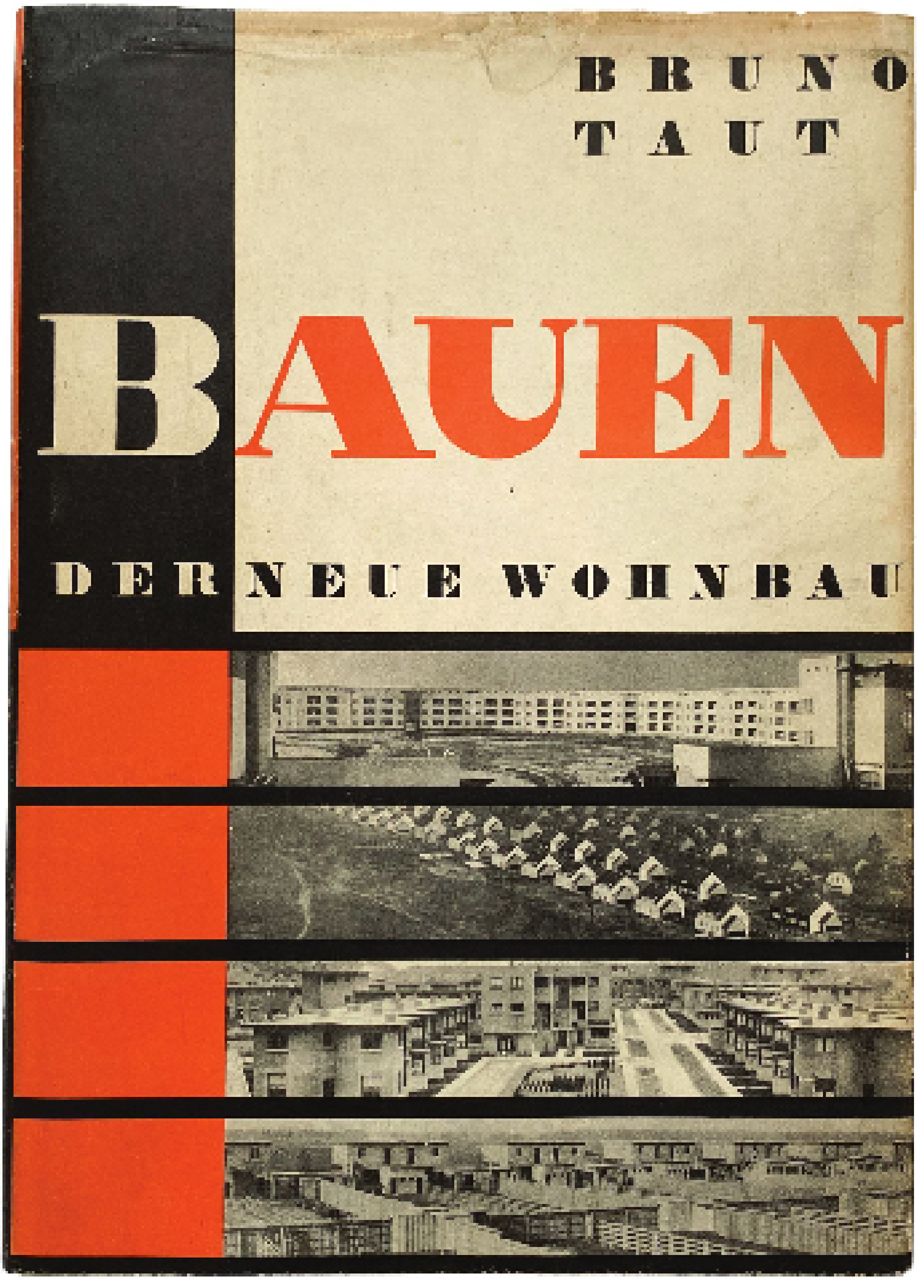
Victor Bourgeois in Horta's Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, that task had not become easier or less urgent. The main point of discussion turned out to be how many Maisons Dom-ino could be placed on top of each other, a question that was reflected in the title of the lecture by Walter Gropius: "Low-, Mid-, or High-Rise Building?"22 The discussions held in Brussels were summarized afterward by Karel Teige:

> *The actual housing need is so pressing in all countries that when it comes to the classes at subsistence level, we must use the term "housing destitution." . . . The fact that construction ceased [during the war] for a period of four to eight years is not the only reason for today's housing shortage. Nor is the insufficiency of housing the result of an unusual increase in population. . . . All the factors which have caused the housing crisis are deeply rooted in the economic conditions of the present day. . . . Although the restoration of private housebuilding and the free market are the dominant tendencies in nearly every country, nonetheless it remains the fact that private enterprise housing can bring no relief to the housing crisis. . . . Thus today's boarding-houses, Dutch flats, residences for single women, apartment-hotels, boarding schools, homes for children and for the elderly, etc., are embryonic forms of a future qualitative revolution in our housing form. Instead of the small-scale organization of individual households, we have the centralization of household functions and the conversion of the isolated nuclear household into a modern mechanized operation.23*

Teige didn't explicitly address the situation in Belgium, where the issue of social housing had been raised only occasionally.24 That political negligence was seized by Victor Bourgeois, during a gathering of the preparatory committee of CIAM 3, when he justified the repetition of the theme of the previous meeting from 1929: "We believed that we had to raise this question in the light of public opinion, like the Red Cross of Belgium raises the question of tuberculosis or cancer. We must create a vast movement of opinion. To raise this question simply and practically, we could organize classes on modern architecture in the schools of Brussels. . . . We want to make the most of it so that Belgium is all shaken up."25 Bourgeois had experienced how necessary collective housing was when he completed in 1925—he was only twenty-eight years old—the Cité Moderne, a garden suburb of 275 houses on the outskirts of Brussels. It became an icon of modern European housing in the interwar period: Giedion considered it, in Space, Time, and Architecture from 1941, as "the signal for the present-day movement" of garden cities.[26] The project was featured on the cover of Bruno Taut's 1927 book Bauen: Der neue Wohnbau, third in a column of four photographs, together with the Hufeisensiedlung in Britz by Taut and Martin Wagner, Taut's own Siedlung Freie Scholle in Tegel, and Leopold Fischer's Siedlung Dessau-Ziebigk.

Nevertheless, the Cité Moderne is also testament to the reluctance that every communal, collective, or social housing project encountered in Belgian society. It was commissioned by a tenants' cooperative with the same name, led by the architect and his brother Pierre. The Belgian government, fearing the emergence of a dangerous "red belt" around Brussels, decided to suspend a system of cheap loans for houses and rooms shortly after the initial plans by Bourgeois had been developed in 1922. His garden city was reduced in size, and apart from three small shops, no communal facilities were built. Apart from these external circumstances, there is something in the architecture of the Cité Moderne itself that expresses, as Auke van der Woud has written, "a preference for the picturesque and the individual, and an aversion to the uniform and the collective."[27]

The same can, of course, be said about the garden city in general, and it explains why this "genre" has been almost exclusively identified, for exactly a century since the country's foundation in 1830, with the ample possibility of social housing in Belgium, as Marcel Smets has shown in his 1977 survey.[28] If the garden city movement tried to conserve nineteenth-century ways of living rurally—opting for suburbanization to flee from urbanization—there is another phenomenon from the same century that has been equally decisive: epidemic diseases, considered the most significant or dangerous consequence of inadequate housing. In 1851, a surgeon named Adolphe Burggraeve from Ghent—often considered the Manchester of the continent because of its textile industry—was involved in the founding of Belgium's first social construction company, the Société Anonyme pour l'Amélioration des Demeures de la Classe Ouvrière.[29] The founding members of the corporation did not lack enthusiasm, as the statutes indicate:


BRUNO
TAUT
BAUEN
DER NEUE WOHNBAU

Bruno Taut, Bauen: Der Neue Wohnbau (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1927), cover.
Collection Josef Chladek, Vienna.

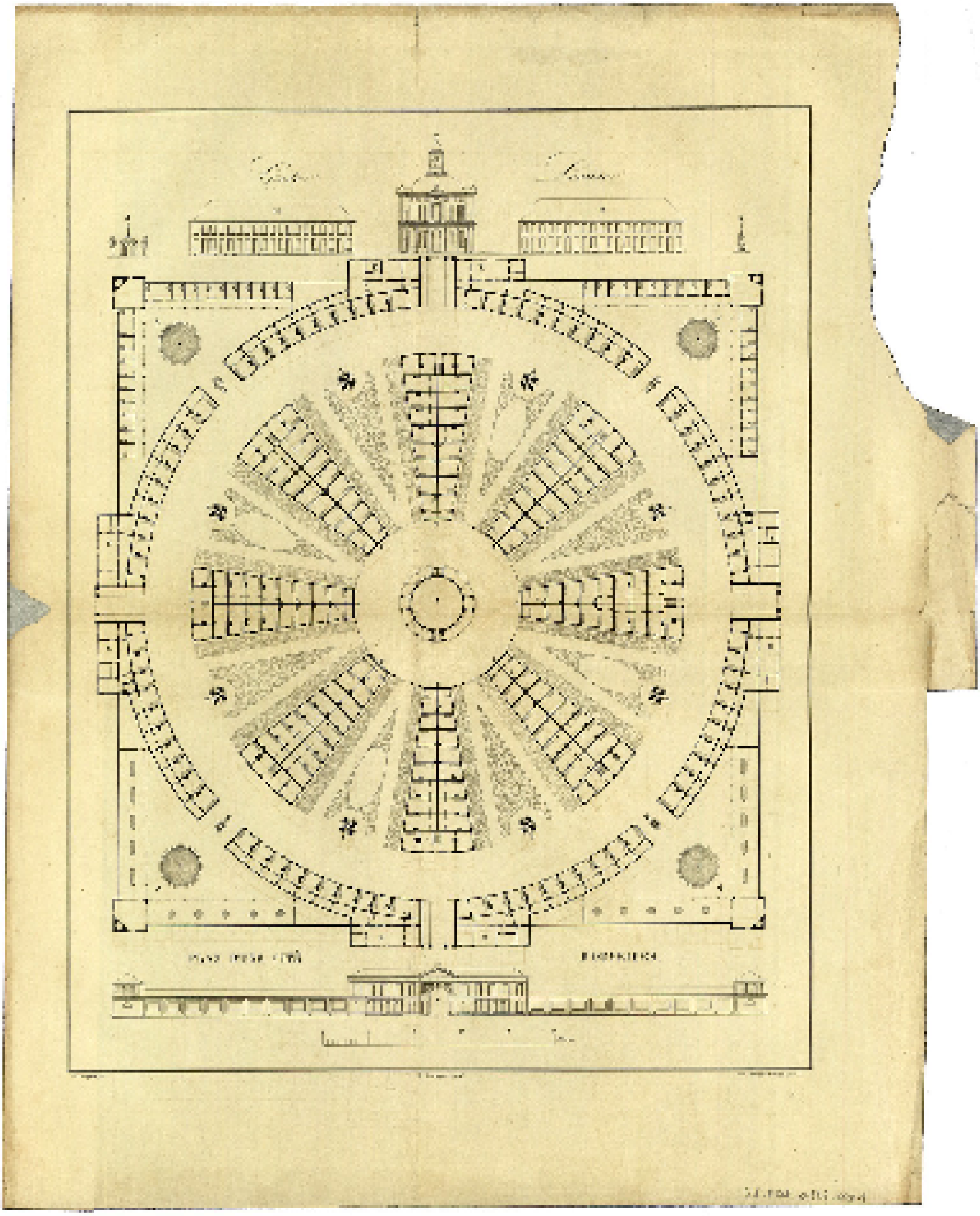
> Never has so much attention been paid to the fate of the working class. Individuals, local authorities, governments, all conspire to try to remove from society the source of the dangers that could come from this side. If anything should reassure one about the future, it is this very solicitude. . . . Large property, finance, industry, commerce— all have given it the support of their most considerable names. . . . The society will establish constructions bringing together the conditions of healthiness, comfort, and affordability, including, in addition to housing for households with or without children and for single people, daycare schools, baths and washhouses, restaurants, et cetera.[30]

One year later, Burggraeve, who is also known as the inventor of a cotton splint, designed a familistère for Ghent, entitled Cité Louise: a radially symmetrical plan with housing units, including collective facilities in the middle and in the corners.

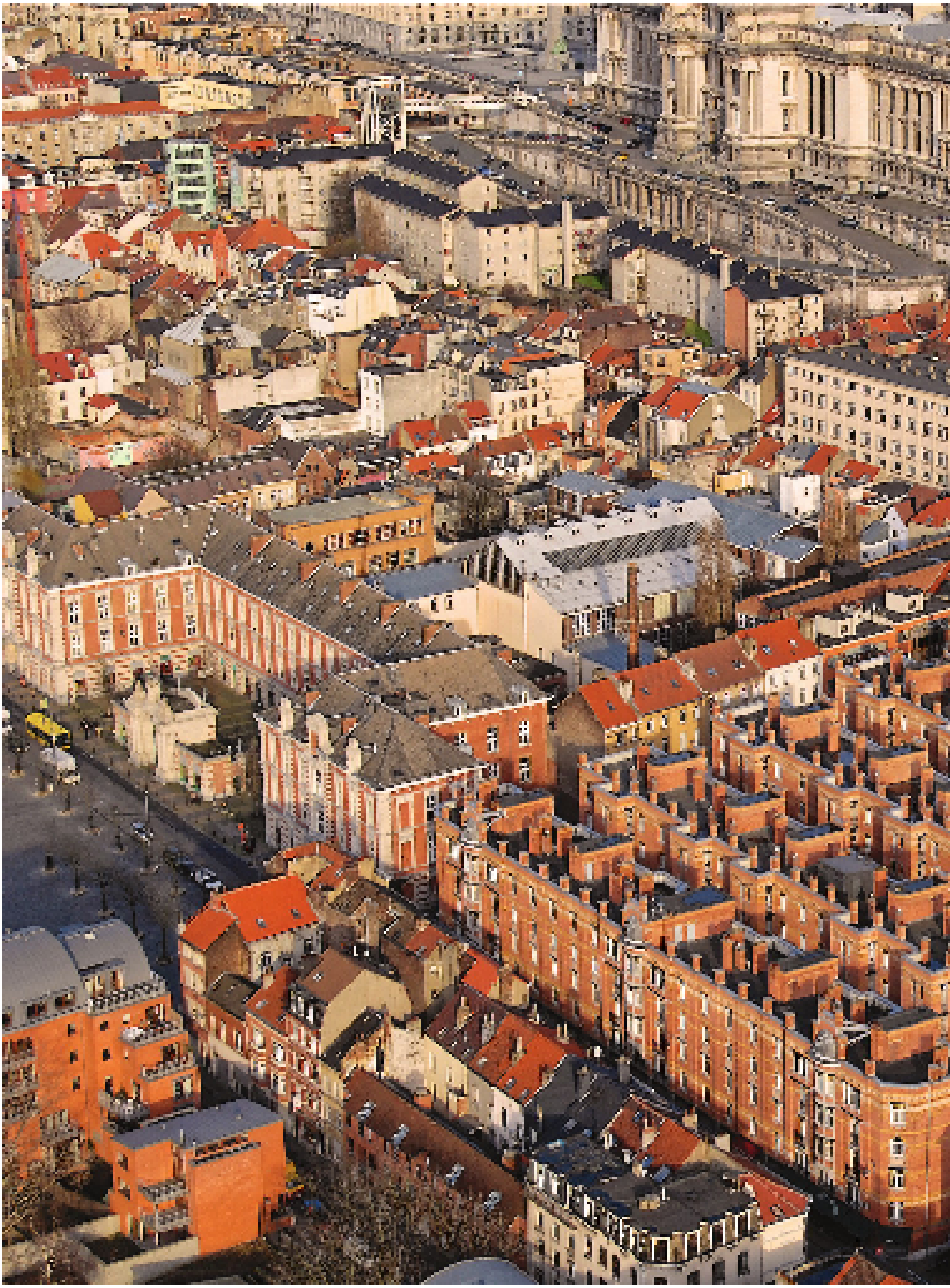
The high bourgeoisie and its representatives in the city council were not amused, and even the federal government issued an alarmed reaction, indicating reprovingly that it wasn't the task of a public administration to compete with private construction initiatives. Moreover, the city council noted, "owning a house gives more security, it gives more satisfaction. . . . It represents not only the work of our craftsmen and our retailers, but also order, foresight, and paternal love."[31] Burggraeve's project was shelved, and his société anonyme was dissolved. Political support was absent, and no enlightened industrial entrepreneur came to the rescue— as had Henri De Gorge, who built a company town nears Mons between 1810 and 1830.

The combination of hygienic and ideological considerations made public housing a perhaps unexpected target: whatever happens, people shouldn't meet in architecture, because they can spread diseases but also ideas hostile to the established order. One such instance— and not a garden city— was built before the First World War: Cité Hellemans, completed in 1915 in Brussels in the shadow of the Palace of Justice from 1883, and analyzed one century later by Bruno De Meulder.[32]

This project was an unintentional consequence of the reorganization of Brussels à la Haussmann in reaction to successive epidemics during the nineteenth century. While such operations did clean up certain neighborhoods, deplorable living conditions



Adolphe Burggraeve, Cité Louise: Plan d'une cité d'ouvriers, Lithograph De Busscher, Ghent, 1852. Ghent University Library.



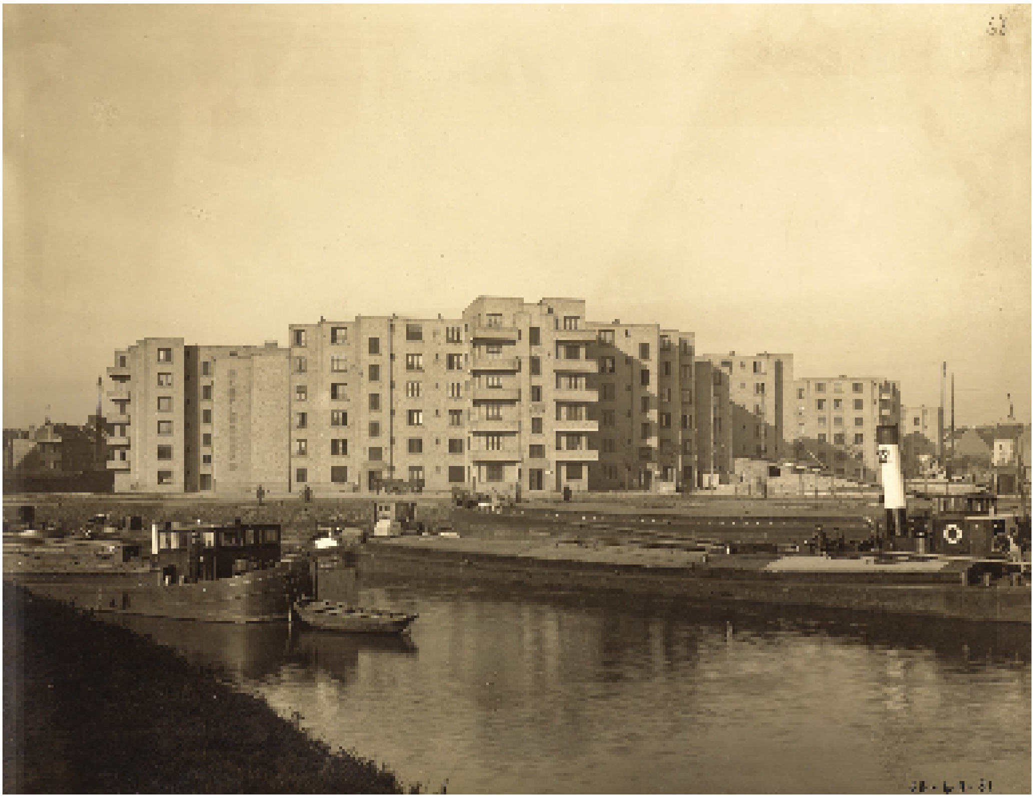
Émile Hellemans, Cité Hellemans, Brussels, 1915. Photo Simon Schmitt, Global View srL, 2007.

resurfaced immediately, and much worse, in other quarters. As a replacement of one of those “new” slums, the Cité Hellemans was an initiative from a coalition of Socialists and Liberals in the municipality of Brussels. Named after its architect, Émile Hellemans, it’s a composition of seven parallel slabs with four floors and a flat roof, separated by six pedestrian streets, resulting in 272 units with three or four rooms each. While its refined and decorated brick facades were needed to make the presence of working-class housing in the city palatable to the more affluent, almost all other architectural properties are aimed at keeping the residents “healthy,” both mentally and physically. What makes this immediately visible is the forest of ventilation pipes on the roofs— in Hellemans’s first project, a communal terrace had been planned for the top of the buildings, but that provision was dropped. Private terraces open onto the pedestrian streets, but mainly to enable social control. The insides of the stairwells are clad with the same bricks as the outside facades, which was supposed to give the residents the impression of still being on the street, and to encourage them to behave accordingly—there is domestic, private space, and there is infrastructure, and any nuance in between must be avoided at all costs. The high level of equipment in these buildings can be interpreted in the same way: every apartment has gas and water, not only to keep the rooms clean but also to keep residents from having to go down the hall to fetch coal or water, thus protecting the privacy of the family. Comfort, in this way, becomes a soft discipline. Although the Cité Hellemans is an impressive example of concentrated, stacked public housing that guarantees the presence of workers in the inner city, it is not an instance of social housing in the literal sense.

This rhythmic exception in the urban tissue of Brussels is clearly a product of the nineteenth century, reminding Belgium that, following the First World War, more and different public housing— less fragmented, grander, serried, taller, efficient, more generous, collective, and not superficial— was both very necessary and very unlikely. The gathering of CIAM in Brussels in 1930, despite its desire to consider other large- scale and taller options for public housing, didn’t change much: while it certainly makes sense to insert Le Corbusier’s Maison Dom-ino in the architectural history of Belgium, it would be much more difficult do the same with the Ville Radieuse. And yet something did shift at the end of the 1920s, however modestly. Just as European architects felt *compelled to respond, on the one hand, to the large-scale public housing buildings being erected in the Soviet Union (while some of them simply decided to move to Moscow) and, on the other hand, to the consequences of the Great Depression, a few city councils in Belgium became convinced of the need to provide tenements for the working class.*

In the city of Ghent, mostly thanks to the persistence of a Socialist alderman named Désiré Cnudde, two apartment buildings were completed in 1931, on a 10,500-square-meter site on the Left Bank of the river Scheldt; hence the project's name: Scheldeoord. The soil of the terrain, so close to the water, wasn't resistant, while the municipality wanted a rapid completion of the work because the housing shortage was increasing. Therefore, 890 piles with a length from eleven to twelve meters were used— the so-called pieux Franki, patented in 1909 by Belgian engineer Edgard Frankignoul, and used intensively for the development of the metal industry in the south of Belgium, along the river Meuse.33 The architect of Scheldeoord was Paul Detaeye, who was also commissioned by the municipality, in the same period, to design sixty rowhouses for workers, as well as a home for the elderly. The two tenements of five or six floors contained 454 housing units, each with two to five rooms; the apartments were distributed to ensure, in almost every one of them, both a north and a south facade, but also the possibility to hang the laundry outside.34

From a bird's-eye view, the influence of the 1920s housing blocks in Vienna by Karl Ehn is visible, for example in the general layout of the buildings, with a long, rectangular courtyard equipped with playgrounds, or in the pronounced porches and the robust balconies in masonry; research by Leen Meganck has indeed shown that the socialist policy in the Austrian capital was well known among Belgian politicians with the same convictions.35 A first project for Scheldeoord was crowned with saddle roofs and high-rise oriels; underneath the roof, the architect wanted to install a drying loft for laundry. Here too, however, budget deficits intervened, and Detaeye was asked to scrap everything that was not strictly necessary (thus giving the architecture its more abstract look), and to increase the number of units, resulting in sometimes very small apartments. Nevertheless, Scheldeoord is one of the few housing complexes in Belgium that— in the tradition of the Viennese Höfe— creates and defines a considerable part of the city, with a scale and a presence that is large enough to



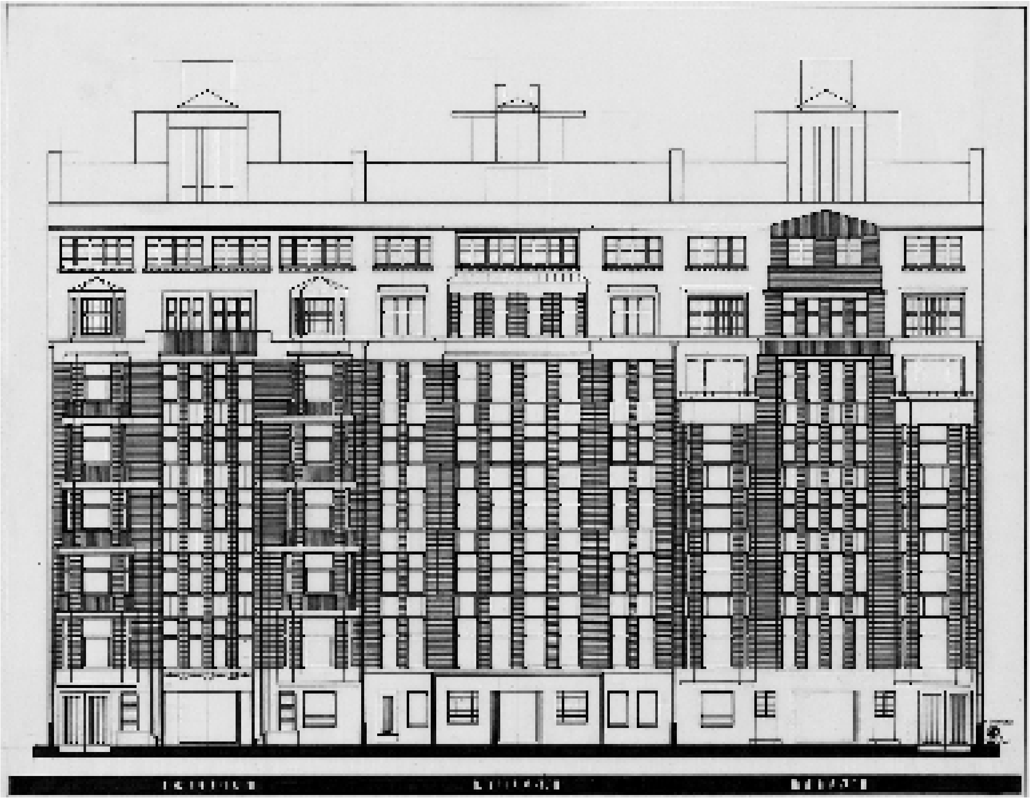
Paul Detaeye, Scheldeoord, Ghent, 1931. Collection Museum of Industry, Ghent.

symbolize shared values, and to guarantee its survival: although not very judiciously renovated in the 1990s (and now largely hidden behind more recent buildings), this unrepeated sample of public housing continues to function.

The same applies to another realization from the same period, built by Alfons Francken in Antwerp near the Stuivenbergplein: a closed building block, six stories high, of 174 residential units with a sober facade. The building complex has a triangular inner courtyard that gives access to the apartments, starting half a floor above the ground level to assure privacy; the homes on the higher floors are accessed via a stairwell on the street side. Francken’s block was completed in 1931. Four similar buildings, designed by other architects but resulting from the same policy and on behalf of the same housing company, were built in the same decade. In the courtyards of some of these buildings, public swimming pools were installed. Then the Second World War broke out, and the public housing program was halted.

Francken was a precocious, enthusiastic, and well-read architect with metropolitan aspirations. In 1924, he founded a magazine simply entitled Bouwkunst, which was announced as a “monthly for new ideas in architecture, art movements, study interests, expertise.” It was discontinued after one year, but in one of the articles contributed by Francken himself (and followed by a rave review of Vers une architecture), he wrote about the Chicago Tribune Tower Competition of 1923:

> Let us compare the project of the New York architect J. M. Howell and that of the architects Walter Gropius and Adolf Meyer. The two designs are very different. That of the former resembles a church tower in English gothic style; that of the other two is a cubist block. The gothic tower may have been the most beautiful design, but the cubist block by Walter Gropius was for the Chicago Tribune the actual office building. Care was taken to ensure that every room of this gigantic building let in plenty of natural light. . . . Large cities and large residences have yet to be created in our country, with completely new points of view in terms of hygiene and traffic, but . . . that will only be possible by taking steps forward, not by looking back— only by the exclusive character of the metropolis, not by a rural idyllicism.[36]



Alfons Francken, Helenalei, Antwerp, 1923, facade. Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.

Already in 1914, at the age of thirty-two, Francken had designed what can be considered as an expression of the naivety that is required for any kind of urban idyll: a group of five art deco apartment buildings in the city of Antwerp, thirty meters high, three of which were built between 1921 and 1923, with one additional block from 1926 on the other side of the street.

Each floor plan groups two mirrored apartments per floor, around the central staircase with an elevator and skylight. The ground floor offered, among other things, space for the caretaker's house with a lodge and a waiting area, a bicycle shed, and a room for electrical installations. The large backyard accommodated a tennis court and a playground. This was a distinct real estate project, funded and (initially) rented by building companies, and aimed at wealthy clients reaching out for some grandeur in the city, as well as to a cheap domestic staff that had become scarce for countryside villas.[37] The historical importance of these buildings, with names like Cyclops, Vulcan, and Titan, lies in the way high-rise residential architecture was "tested" in a Belgian city. Not everyone was pleased, least of all the editor in chief of an Antwerp monthly for "home and hearth," who wrote:

> To which emergency measures the acute housing shortage can force us is proven by the skyscraper that master builder Alfons Francken . . . is putting up in the last few months. . . . It needs to be said that we have never felt much for homes that lodge a few hundred people under one roof. Rome has been plagued with it for a long time. The state of health over there is, understandably, most miserable. . . . That is why we repeat that we are, and remain, determined opponents of homes such as those designed by Francken. One doesn't deem those things necessary in London, where the available land covers an entire province—what an idea, then, to introduce it into our relatively small city of Antwerp! . . . In these days of popular development and democratic emancipation, it is to be regarded as a curse.[38]

Much more positive was Hannes Meyer, who wrote an article on Belgian art and architecture in 1925, describing Francken's ensemble as "the tenement of the purest form, created with the greatest self-discipline" and as "a building worthy of a shipyard." He suggested, forgivingly, that some decorations in the street facade had *been requested by the building promoter, while the back facade, "in the spirit of the postal boat, shows purely the living machinery and the elevator shaft and the fire gables and the kitchen terrace and the emergency exit."39 Meyer's praise shows the egalitarian potential of this kind of rational high-rise architecture with shared facilities that could also, in its purest form, accommodate housing in a less privileged way.*

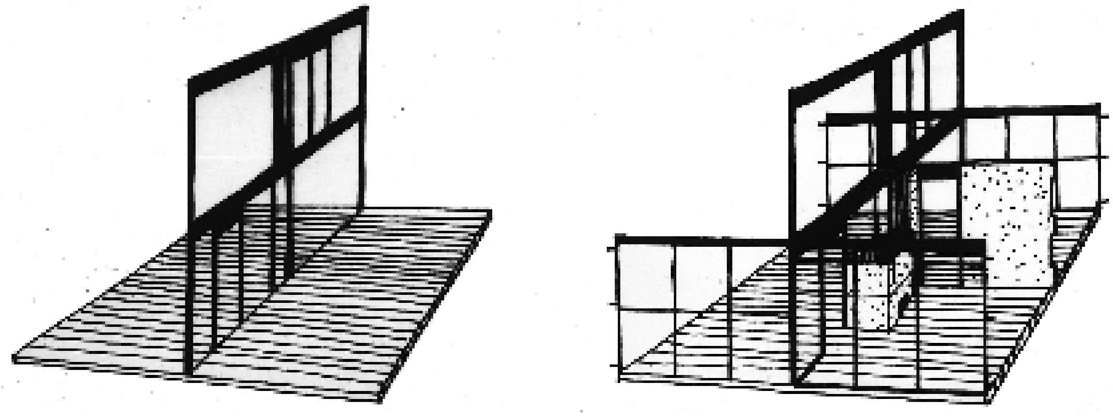
The apartment building or tenement did catch on in Belgium shortly after the Second World War, but architects were seldom involved. In most cases, the results weren't part of a public housing program, and collective facilities were rarely present. One major exception is the apartment building that Willy Van Der Meeren designed for a social housing company in Evere, on the outskirts of Brussels, which was ready for tenants in 1961. "Van Der Meeren's vision on architecture," critic Karel Elno wrote, "is socially structured nearly ad absurdum."40 Indeed, he saw it as his main task to make architecture as cheap and as usable as possible, thanks to industrial applications. In his best works, Van Der Meeren succeeded in combining the joyous inventiveness of a constructor like Jean Prouvé with the political ethos of an architect like Hannes Meyer, by showing that the contradiction between the two doesn't have to exist. If there is one Belgian architect who came close to developing a Belgian Maison Dom- ino, not after the First World War but after the Second, it is Van Der Meeren. This holds true on a figurative level, for he too walked the tightrope— created by the postwar optimism of the welfare state combined with the final flare- up of industrial capitalism— between individual architectonic expression and its dissolution in rationalism and serialization. But the comparison is also literally valid, because in 1954, he developed a prototype named the CeCA House, which was intended to be spread over the territory, but of which only a few were realized.

The single-family houses that were being built to suburbanize Belgium were too expensive for many workers, and whether in use, creation, or representation, they could hardly be considered proletarian. The small, cubic CeCA House— its name refers to the Communauté Européenne du Charbon et de l'Acier, founded in 1952— was made of prefabricated construction elements in steel and concrete to minimize manual labor. After being exhibited in Liège and Charleroi, it became a success: 4,500 orders were taken, but the National Society for Housing refused to give its approval or the financial support necessary to enable prefabrication to go ahead on a large scale.

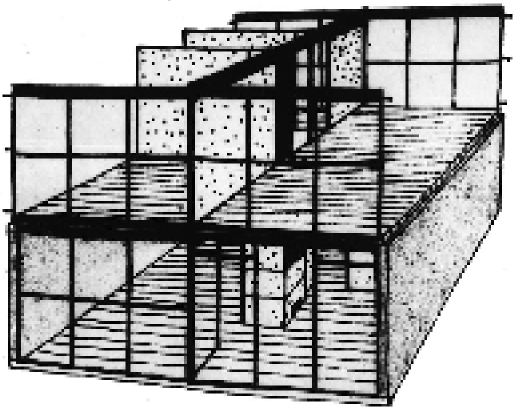
Van Der Meeren was able to start building a housing slab instead, almost at the same time; he presented this project and the CeCA House at the final CIAM congress in Otterlo. Once again, an individual was the impetus: Franz Guillaume, Socialist mayor in Evere since 1948, explicitly longed for a high- rise, "as symbolic as a church," out of an "aversion for all those little houses . . . with candles and crucifixes standing behind the windows."[41] At the beginning of the 1950s, he contacted Le Corbusier about building an Unité d'Habitation for Evere, but the Swiss-French architect declined, and so Van Der Meeren was asked to design his own Unité. It contained 105 apartments on fifteen floors, in a tall, slender volume, almost with the dimensions of a wall, on sturdy, rectangular pilotis— similar, in this regard, to Aldo Rossi's Gallaratese rather than to Corbu's Unité. Two closed stair towers were built in brick; the vertically stacked porches were cast in concrete on site, while the facade panels were prefabricated. Mil De Kooning has correctly suggested, on the part of the architect, "how much imagination was needed, certainly at that time, to be able to see an 'industrial' building as a place where people could live."[42] The apartments are organized according to the "triplex principle": twelve inhabited floors require only four galleries; or differently put, three successive floors are grafted onto one single corridor, a rue intérieure.

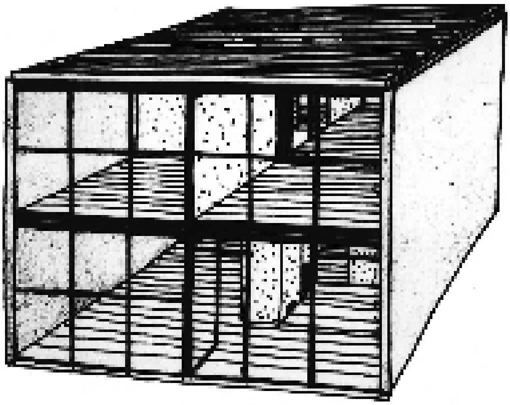
These public rues intérieures, unlike those in the Unité in Marseille, do not go through the center of the building but run along one of its sides, capturing daylight. It was Van Der Meeren's intention to build a vertical garden city, but although he made sure that all communal areas were as spacious as possible, including a toit jardin on top, adding more collective spaces was not possible. Shortly after completion of the building, Van Der Meeren had to admit that there was, for the inhabitants, "little reason to meet for a longer time."[43]

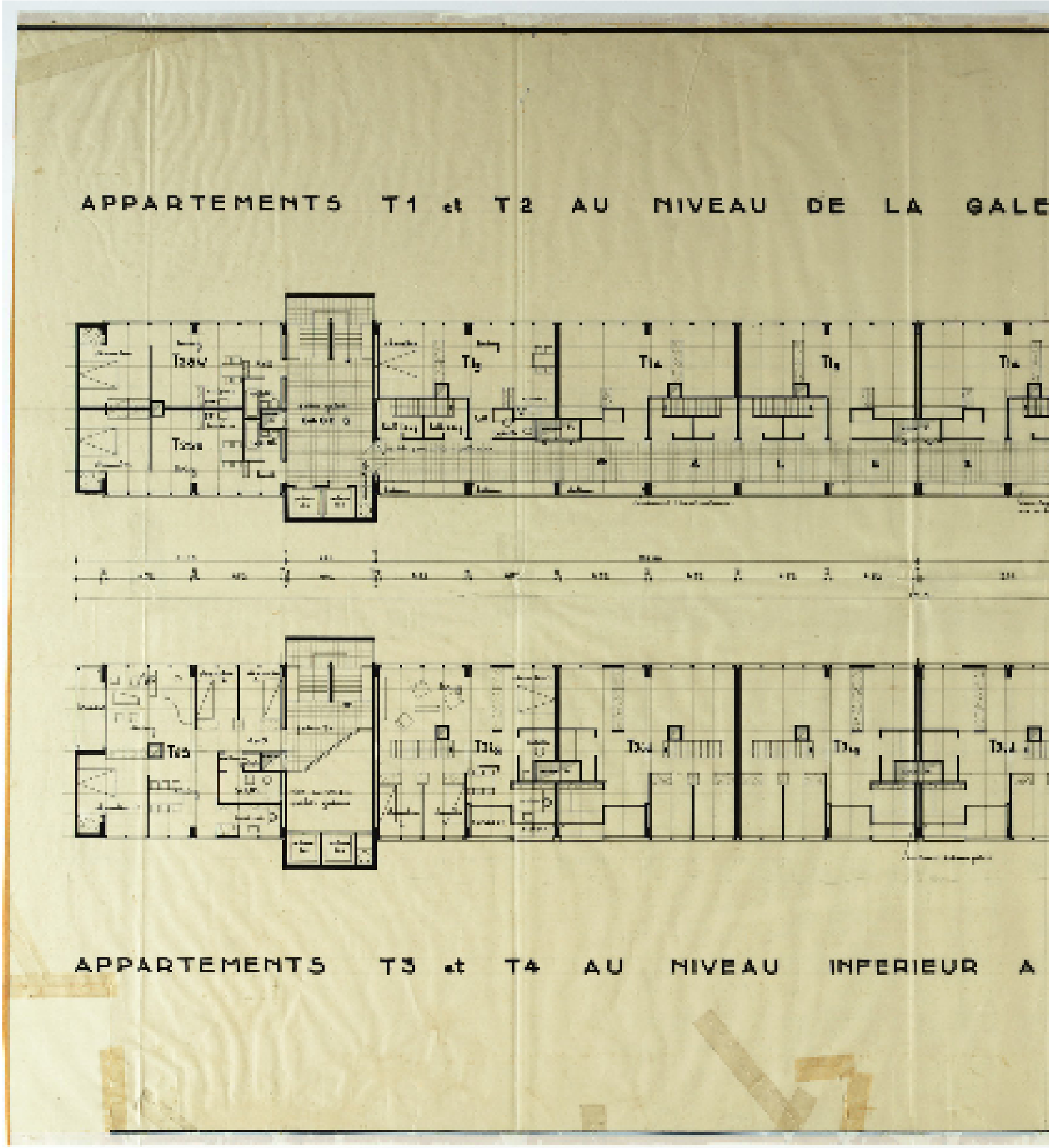
Mayor Guillaume died unexpectedly in 1963, and nothing came of a whole series of planned high-rise buildings in Evere. A similar endeavor did work out in Liège, where, in a sense, a fragment of the Ville Radieuse was built between 1951 and 1970: the social housing at Plaine de Droixhe, on the banks of the Meuse, three kilometers north of the city center, and designed by eGAU— short for Études en Groupe d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme.[44]



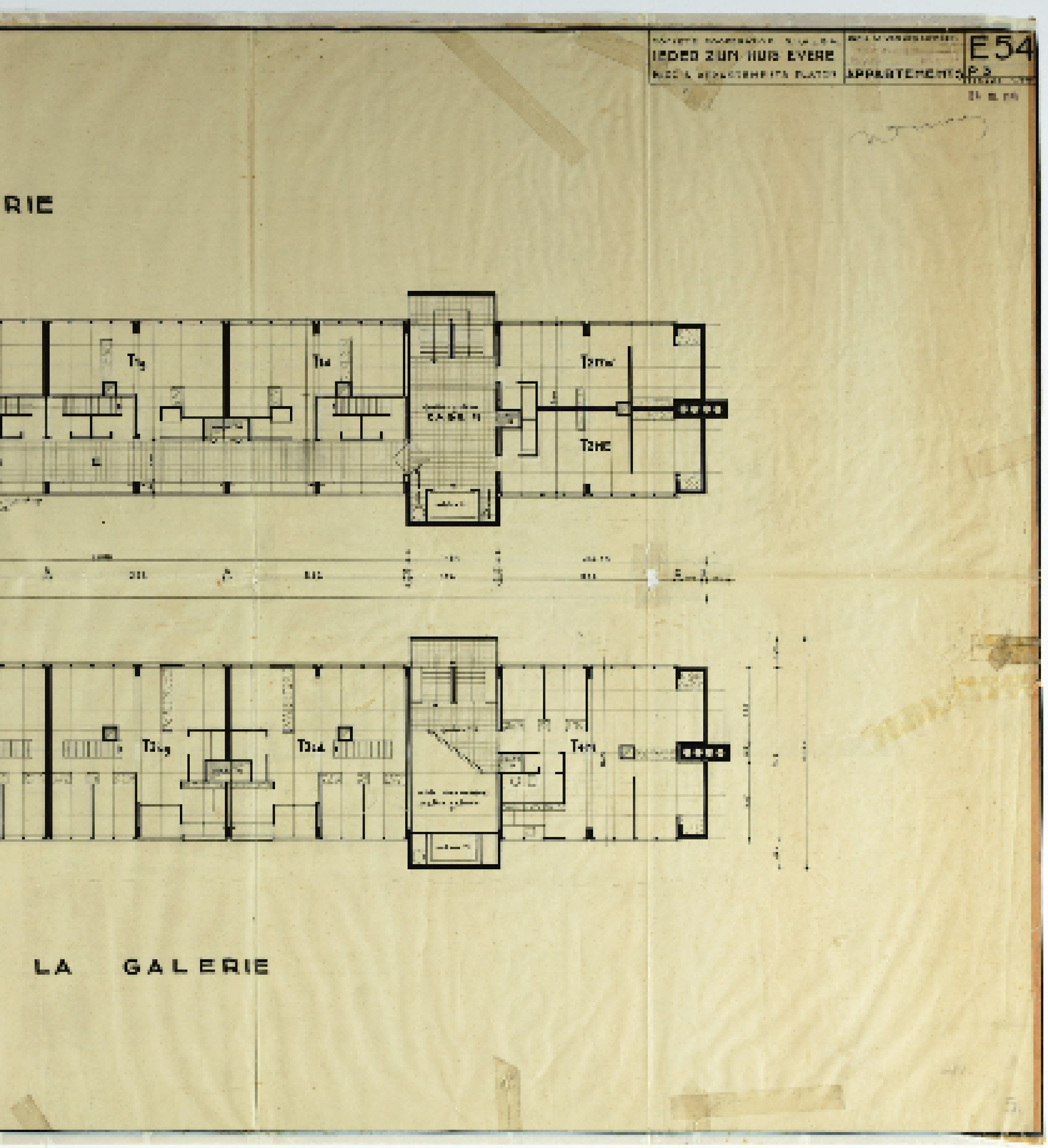
Willy Van Der Meeren, CeCA House, 1954, structural diagram. Collection Mil De Kooning.






APPARTEMENTS T1 et T2 AU NIVEAU DE LA GALE
APPARTEMENTS T3 et T4 AU NIVEAU INFERIEUR A

Willy Van Der Meeren, Ieder Zijn Huis, Evere, 1961, plan. Collection Mil De Kooning.

IEDER ZIJN HUIS EVERE
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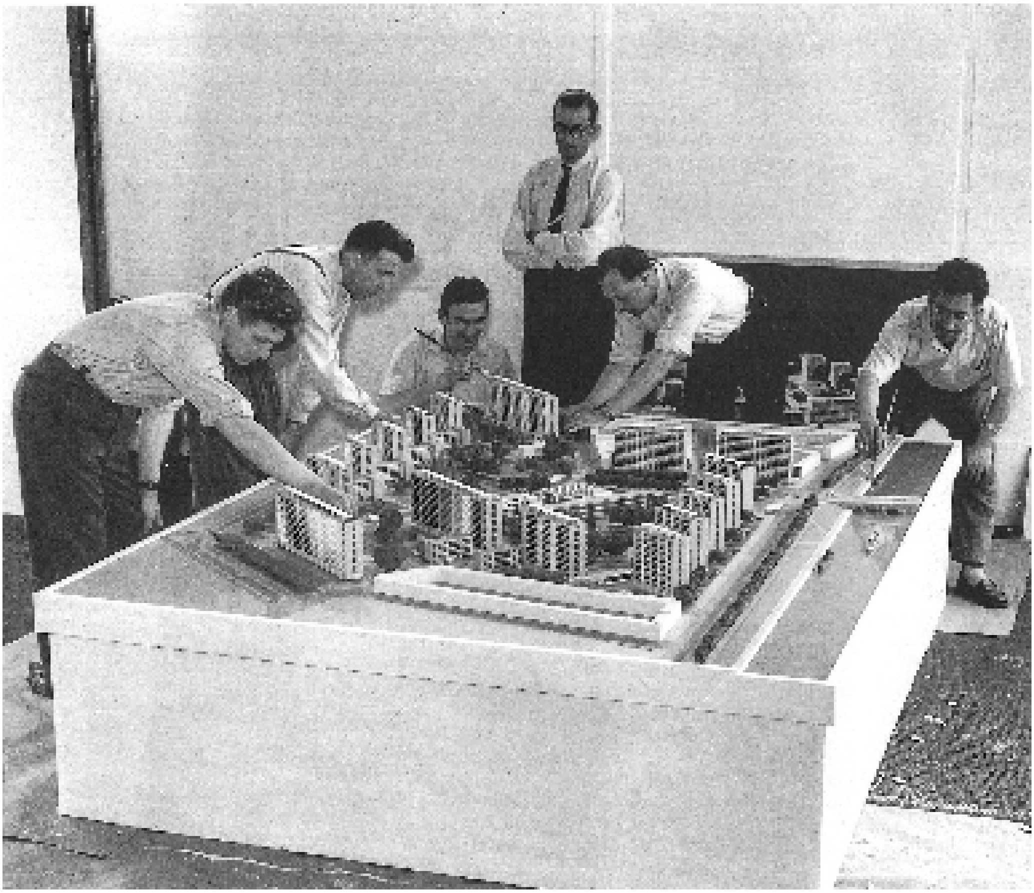
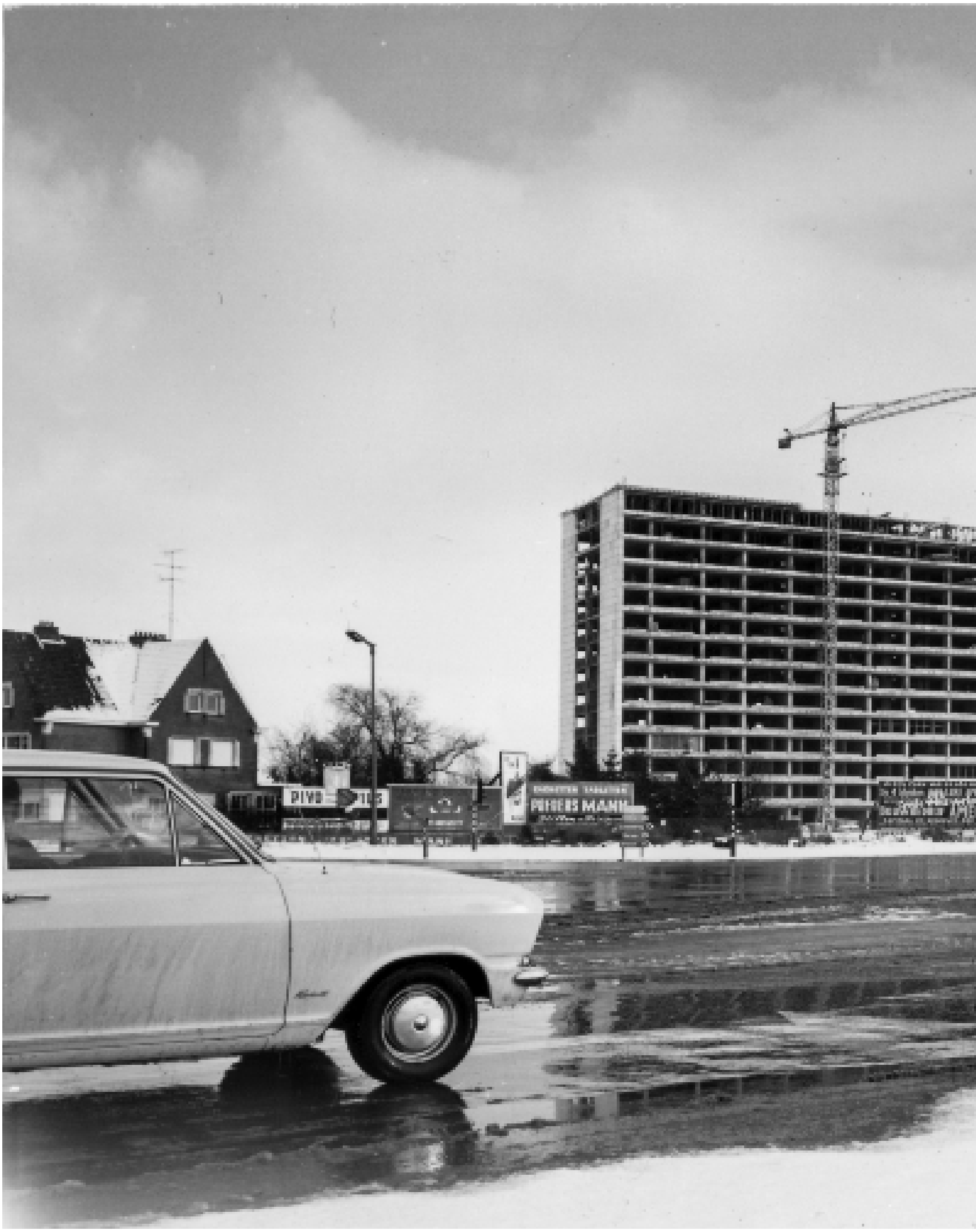


eGAU, Plaine de Droixhe, 1959, maquette. Photograph by D. Daniel.

Here, for once, housing, at the service of more than seven thousand residents, was not limited to securing private spaces for families: schools, a public library, a healthcare center with a nursery, a reception hall, a church, and a police station were also built. The layout of Plaine de Droixhe is a post-Second World War formulaic application of the CIAM doctrines from 1929 and 1930. The apartments are accessed by internal elevators and dark stairwells, and it's only the entrance areas on the ground floor that are more carefully designed, thanks to transparent facades, for example, or the integration of contemporary works of art. The value of Plaine de Droixhe lies in the open way, monumental and unemphatic at the same time, in which it materializes social housing. But apart from its public financing (and notwithstanding le prolongement du logis due to the extra facilities), it comes quite close to the thousands of apartment buildings that arose in Belgium between the 1950s and the 1970s, the period in which the national attachment to rowhouses or villas was expanded to a third housing type: the family flat. This evolution is largely due to two entrepreneurs: Jean-Florian Collin and François Amelinckx.45 Collin was an art deco architect who published an economic study in 1938, in which he argued for the foundation of a savings bank for real estate that would enable citizens to buy a house. He was convinced that "when there is a large majority of tenants, it is not possible to maintain equilibrium in a society."46 With his company Etrimo (Société d'études et de réalisations immobilières en faveur des classes moyennes), he built countless apartment buildings all over the country. Amelinckx, who was mainly active in Flanders, also realized social housing flats, in collaboration with municipalities. In an interview from 1971, he announced that his company built fourteen apartments per working day.47 The activities of Collin and Amelinckx came to a halt by the end of the 1970s because of the economic crisis, a saturation of the market, and a shortage of space. Many of their buildings have survived, often on the outskirts of cities or along infrastructure nodes. In fact, as a child, even before I knew the name of one single architect, I was already familiar with the surname of one of these two businessmen: the five identical, strangely huge slabs, with fifteen floors, standing since the end of the 1960s along the access road to the highway in Sint- Niklaas, were referred to by everyone as the blocks of Amelinckx.


PIVO
PIETERS MANN

Amelinckx, Fabiolapark, Sint-Niklaas, 1966. Photograph by Delro. City Archives Sint- Niklaas.

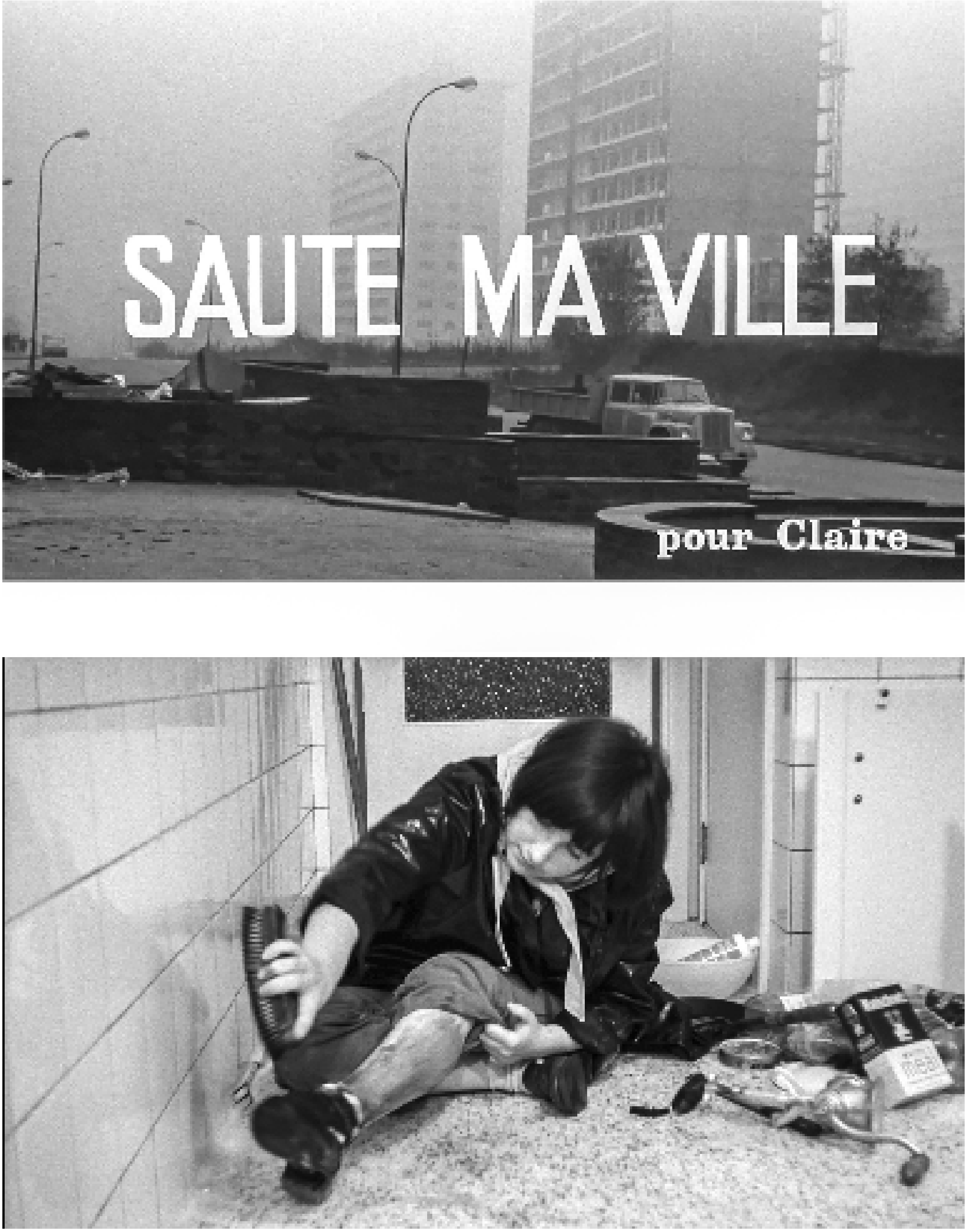
According to some, living in the Amelinckx buildings was something that common people did, while others considered the slabs as proof of modernity and progressiveness. In each case, shouldn’t these pieces of anonymous architecture, in their Hilberseimerian efficiency, be considered as the real “tenements of the purest form”? And aren’t they the penultimate examples of an “architecture of lighted floors”?

These questions cannot disguise the fact that this type of housing can also be accompanied by forms of isolation, loneliness, and alienation. Indeed, the oeuvre of the most important Belgian film director of the twentieth century, Chantal Akerman, can be interpreted as a detached, thorough, but humorous analysis of “the flat life” in postwar Belgium— of the condition humaine in an apartment. Akerman is well known for her movie Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles from 1975, which was named the greatest film of all time in an international poll by the British Film Institute’s magazine in 2022, preceding Vertigo and Citizen Kane.[48] As the title of this film of more than 200 minutes indicates, the main character is reduced to (or at least identified with) her address, and she hardly ever leaves her apartment at that precise location, living a life of boredom and repetition, until, at the end, an outbreak of violence occurs. On the one hand, the situation of Jeanne Dielman is the consequence of life in any modern city, where dwelling— truly being at home— is impossible. As Jean-François Lyotard wrote in his 1988 essay “Domus and the Megapolis,” “the city knows only the domicile”—domestic space is reduced to an address, to data, to numbers in a list, and to quantities in a transaction.[49] But on the other hand, Akerman focuses not on urban life in general, but only on a small, private, and yet ubiquitous element of the city. In fact, those moments within her work— Toute une nuit from 1982 is a good example— in which the characters find some relief, distraction, or solace, are those spent outside, in the street, or in a café. That her target is literally the apartment became clear in her very first short film, Saute ma ville from 1968.

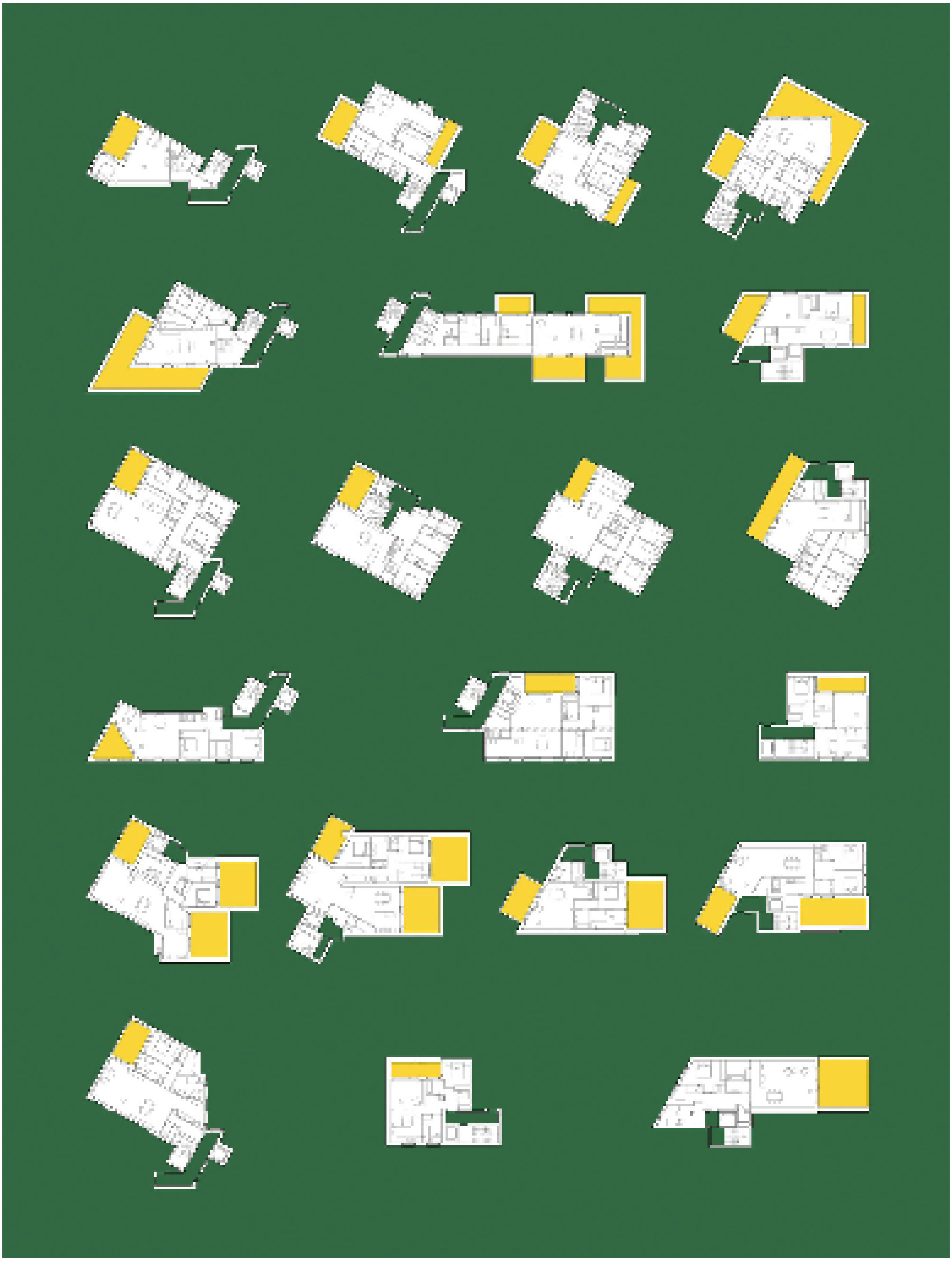
In the 1968 film, a young woman enters an apartment building on the outskirts of a city; other, similar blocks are under construction nearby. Once inside, things get out of hand, as she starts doing typical household chores in a very idiosyncratic way—for example, rubbing shoe polish on her legs instead of on her shoes, or throwing the cat out of the window. And here too everything ends abruptly, when the main character lives up to the title of the film and blows up the apartment, as a pars pro toto for the city.

Many years after Collin's and Amelinckx's activities, and after Akerman's films, the apartment has become a fixed value in the Belgian housing supply, maybe even more than the terraced or single house. In a way, it has made a comeback in the twenty-first century, since living in cities has become the more responsible, stylish, and sustainable thing to do, for example in former port, train, or industrial areas that are being converted into residential areas with apartment buildings. The difference is that developers now actually work together with architects, with sometimes surprising results. One building can, in that sense, be regarded as an architectonic masterpiece—a century after the apartment was introduced in Belgium—because it complicates the traditional, standardized building à la Amelinckx or Collin to an almost absurd degree, while nevertheless presenting a certain dignity and unity toward the surrounding city. Krono, designed by De Smet Vermeulen Architecten and completed in 2019, is located on the site of the old municipal gasworks of Ghent. It contains thirty-six apartments, a sports hall, a café, and a fitness club. The trapezoidal plot with one very sharp corner, together with the internal volume of the sports hall, whose girders penetrate the first layer of apartments, made it necessary to compose no fewer than twenty-one different types of floor plans. Nearly every apartment in this building is different from the next, but what all units have in common is at least one outdoor space (a terrace, a patio, or a loggia), and windows in two different orientations. The plans lead to living quarters that are intertwined in unforeseen ways, restoring the unicity of each individual home, while they are nevertheless all part of the same whole.

This is an example of how architects can try to increase the qualities of apartments offered on the housing market. The boom of the genre in recent years, however, can also have questionable consequences, especially when a high market segment is targeted, and architects, including foreign celebrities, are called upon to design an apartment building that is truly something completely different, and for which a corresponding price can be paid. This is what is going on in the south of Antwerp, where a former shunting yard of no less than 180,000 square meters, after being sold to one single building promoter, is transformed into a new, nearly monofunctional district, based on a masterplan by Secchi-Viganò,


SAUTE MA VILLE
pour Claire

Chantal Akerman, Saute ma ville, 1968, stills. Chantal Akerman Foundation, Brussels.



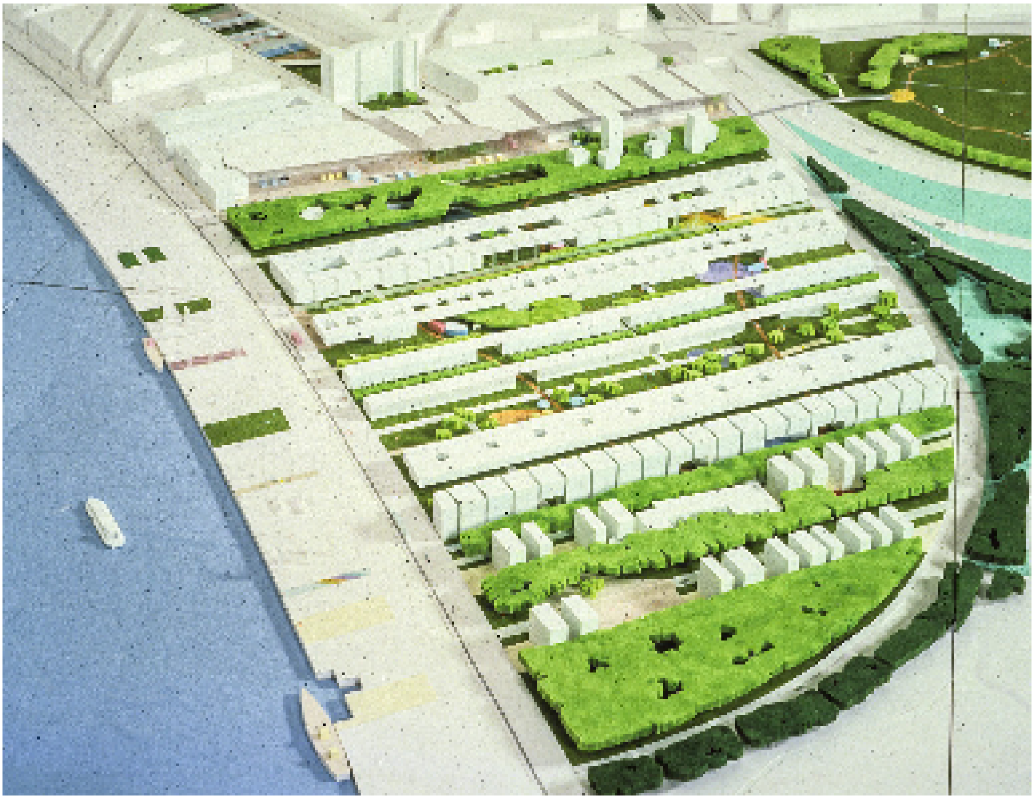
De Smet Vermeulen Architecten, Residential Building Krono, Tondelier, Ghent, 2018, plans.

consisting of pedestrian streets, thanks to a large number of underground car parks. Those streets are bordered by apartment buildings with rather interchangeable plans, but with the most sophisticated facades signed by, among others, Shigeru Ban, Max Dudler, and Stefano Boeri. It is striking, and perhaps ironic, that a well-known architect from a previous generation made a project for this area in the early 1990s that predicted a divergent future. To quote from a 1998 article by Kelly Shannon, “Toyo Ito’s residential strips in Antwerp, by their measurement and configuration, couple a suburban lifestyle with an urban density. The superposition of simple structuring principles creates a diverse and dynamic series of urban living typologies.”50

What Ito’s project—as an uninterrupted linear pattern, perpendicular to the Scheldt— represents most of all within the history of housing in Belgium is a seldom-seen blurring of public and private, facilitated by an equal attention to the housing infrastructure and to the open green spaces in between. It is, or would have been, an intimate neighborhood, intended for the residents. But it was also—because of its combination of open and closed, because of the presence of different but clearly separated functions, because of its clarity and tranquility—a proposal that could guarantee a balance between individuality and communality. Mixing and combining all kinds of properties of the Belgian residential triumvirate of the rowhouse, the villa, and the apartment, in this project, the opportunity arose to redefine, expand, or even dissolve domestic space. It could have been the perfect riposte to the wittiest criticism that Baudelaire fired at Belgium, back in the nineteenth century, when he was walking through the empty city streets (the italics, expressing disbelief, are his): “Everybody at home! (tiny closed-in gardens).”51

There are, of course, other projects, also in this century, in which something similar has been attempted, and sometimes successfully so, but not on this scale, and only exceptionally with public housing in mind. One final example can illustrate the tenacity of housing habits and dogmas, with deep roots in the past, and therefore often unconscious and even unmentionable, manifesting themselves outside of the city too, and impeding rather small-scale proposals. In 2011, the municipality of Westerlo, to the east of Antwerp, organized a competition for forty-four social housing units. One of the five proposals stood out because of the installation of a common garden and the interchangeability of every *element. In the project by Dogma, entitled Frame(s), the exterior of each of the forty-four houses is indistinguishable within the larger whole. The site—a triangular open meadow surrounded by detached houses with small private gardens—is respected as much as possible: the houses are arranged in an L shape along the two edges. The resulting open area is a common garden, separated ambiguously from the houses by strips of open verandas and allotment gardens.*

It's a spatial organization that elides the strict division between infrastructure and the house. The interior plan of the units also complicates this strict zoning: a service wall runs the length of one side in each house, and more than a third of this wall runs outside along the veranda. This, together with the large window framing a view of the garden, has the strange effect of blending inside and outside, and of emphasizing the presence of the common garden without impinging on privacy. Looking out the window, inhabitants do not see the houses of their neighbors or their own small garden, but a grand shared space, idyllic in its natural character, undisturbed by the usual chaos. Frame(s) provides every assurance to the inhabitant of not being alone—with all the liabilities and opportunities attendant on social existence. Moreover, it's a project that finally, after almost a hundred years, merges Maison Dom-ino with the Belgian rowhouse: the common wall becomes a kind of snake that swallows everything whole, including the stairs, the kitchen, and the bathroom, indeed allowing the two floor plates to remain fully open and lighted. Dogma's proposal came in second place; the project that won, by Belgian architects Plus Office, had a chaotic overall appearance, explicitly guaranteeing the recognizability of every individual house. Although it hardly differed from the unplanned suburban parceling all around, it was met with strong resistance from local residents. A total of 420 objections were submitted to the municipality. "A healthy mix of owner-occupied and rental properties would be much better for the integration of the people in the neighborhood," a spokesperson said. Not much later, the project was canceled by the city council.[52]



Toyo Ito, Zuid, Antwerp, 1991, model. Archives Geert Bekaert, Ghent University.

Dogma, Frame(s), Westerlo, 2011.

4 Drive-Thru Nation

It is a classic moment during family gatherings, when one of my uncles or aunts is reminded of what I consider a well- established fact: that I don’t have a car or a driver’s license. These parties usually take place in areas that are nearly impossible to reach, so the question isn’t that far- fetched. “How do you keep that up?” they ask, full of incredulity, but also with a bit of pity. “How do you manage?” The self- evidence of life with a car is what seems to distinguish me most directly from my relatives, also across generational boundaries. For my parents, it was, unlikely enough, possible to pick up a driver’s license for free at the town hall on the day of their twenty-first birthday— a driving test became compulsory in Belgium as late as 1977. But I also have both older and younger nephews who buy a new car every three years, as something to look forward to and to be proud of, as a reward for hard work. This device is indispensable for the organization of their daily lives, as it is for so many people— a fact illustrated by an anecdote about a friend of one of my nieces who wanted to leave her boyfriend and his suburban house behind: the first thing she did, inadvertently announcing the breakup, was ask on social media if anyone knew of a cheap car for sale. This incident shows, quite literally, the perceived connection between cars and freedom, but it also indicates that it is a privilege to be able to proclaim, “I hate cars,” as I am wont to do, or to assert, “if there *is a single apocalyptic invention in the twentieth century it is the automobile rather than the atomic bomb," as Kenneth Frampton did during a lecture in 1999.1*

The contradictions of contemporary life with or without a car were pointed out in an essay by Rachel Cusk, published in 2019 in the New York Times Magazine. She describes "the sight of a man or woman on a bicycle with a child and heavy shopping strapped to the back, pedaling furiously through the rain while being overtaken by a stream of cars, or drawn up at a traffic light beside a large clean car with another parent and child sitting calmly inside."2 Who, in this scenario, is worse off? Although principled choices can be made, based on clear arguments— cars are polluting, expensive, dangerous, and (since the turn of the century) almost always very ugly; they often get stuck in traffic; they inspire aggressive behavior; like a straitjacket, they isolate you from the rest of the world; and if you're not behind the wheel, depending on the driver, you might get car sick— in most cases, choosing a means of transport is done through force of circumstance, which excludes, of course, the possibility of free choice. In Belgium, for many people, circumstances do make a car necessary, to the degree that it is not difficult to get the impression that this country has been developed for the purpose of automobiles rather than for human beings. As a child, I was told many times— and this was always accompanied by pride, both for me and for those who were speaking— that an astronaut in outer space could distinguish two brightly lit phenomena when looking at our planet: the Great Wall of China, and all the way on the other side of the Earth (and a lot smaller), Belgium, integrally illuminated by a nationwide network of streets, roads and highways, with an accompanying 2.2 million streetlights, turned on from dusk to dawn. Although a more recent official rule in Flanders is that the light goes out when it's not strictly necessary, spaceman Thomas Pesquet, looking down on Europe from the International Space Station, suspended 250 miles above Earth, confirmed in 2017 that "Belgium clearly distinguishes itself as usual."3 Belgian nights, during the second half of the twentieth century, all had a yellowish- orange glow coming from low-pressure sodium vapor lamps, which have been replaced by LeD lamps over the past decade. The official reason for this unbridled use of energy is safety: if drivers can see everything at night, there will be fewer accidents, something that statistics unfortunately *contradict. The unofficial reason is financial: using electricity generates money for energy companies, for the politicians who sit on the board of directors of those companies, and for regions and municipalities that would receive less money from the government if they spent less.4*

Because of all these lamps, tunnels, pylons, cables, wires, streets, roads, highways, trucks, and cars, Belgium is not only visibly marked for life, but its inhabitants also have to cope with a particular sound mix, described in a novel from 2002 by Tom Lanoye: "In the distance, the highway sings incessantly— a deep bass that you can't imagine fading away; you can live wherever you want to, cars and trucks pass by everywhere, close by, far away: roaring engines, thundering wheels, the soundtrack of a nation, day and night."5 Foreign travelers probably don't mind the noise, if they notice it at all. For them, Belgium can indeed appear to be one large, well-maintained, and efficient road network— not a destination and not even a real place, but rather "the world's first drive- thru nation," as Rem Koolhaas put it in a conversation with Douglas Coupland in 1994.6 Koolhaas and OMA had been working on Euralille since the end of the 1980s: the extension of the northern French city of Lille, closer to Belgium than to Paris, with a business district and a high-speed train station. Driving from his office in Rotterdam to the building site, the Dutch architect passed through Belgium twice a week, in both directions, at the wheel of a black Maserati Quattroporte. The experience of Belgium as road infrastructure, freely accessible to move between countries that are more important as destinations (strangely echoing the genesis of the country as a buffer state), was put into words back in 1974 by art historian Barbara Reise. "I'd heard jokes," she wrote in a travel report, "about the benefit of trans-Europe superhighways allowing people to pass through Belgium without stopping."7 Reise's report was timely, in the sense that Belgium's highways and roads were nearly completed by the mid- 1970s— or at least, from that decade onward, far- reaching infrastructure works became rare. An all- time record was set in 1972: more than 276 kilometers of new highway became available. Yet at the end of 1973 and the start of 1974, following the oil embargo and a price increase for fuel of more than 300 percent, six "car-free Sundays" were organized— days set by the government on which motorists were prohibited from using a vehicle with a combustion engine. The deserted roads, combined with a near total silence, seemed to suggest that a virus or a poisonous gas had wiped out the population; elsewhere, public life revived, temporarily, with parades, collective walks, and the return of the horse and carriage.

For a century and a half, the building of roads had been crucial for the country. Historian Léopold Genicot described this in 1948 in his book Histoires des routes belges depuis 1704, most likely as an expression of his own beliefs:

> One of the most common ideas in the young kingdom of Belgium is undoubtedly that of the usefulness of good connecting roads. It is expressed daily, with the grandiloquence of the moment, in the newspapers as well as in official documents. It haunts the minds of the public officials, civil servants, publicists without distinction of opinion, businessmen, landowners. The government, the permanent deputations, the colleges of aldermen, the boards of directors, the simple individuals— everyone is penetrated by this idea. All are intimately convinced that the multiplication of roads . . . is the best way to ensure that the new state will soar in all areas.[8]

What isn't mentioned in this summary is the way in which all those roads can or should be used, and by whom—and what kind of fault lines this network can create, or deepen, in society. The conviction that a significant increase in road construction was necessary had emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century because a small but powerful elite was very eager to drive their cars, even if only as a weekend pastime. Though modest in nature and size, the car, with its need for a flat, regular, straight, and continuous surface, made the development of a road network necessary, urgent, and drastic. A device that was not yet part of the daily life of the population started to determine the development of the territory. The Belgian case confirms what French philosopher André Gorz wrote in 1973, in a period when it began to dawn on many that cars are not the general blessing they were promised to be. His essay "The Social Ideology of the Motorcar" was published in one of the first issues of Le Sauvage, a French monthly dedicated to ecological themes, such as pollution, belief in continuous growth, and overconsumption. In its first sentences, Gorz revealed an analogy between cars and a particular typology:

> The worst thing about cars is that they are like castles or villas by the sea: luxury goods invented for the exclusive pleasure of a very rich minority, and which in conception and nature were never intended for the people. Unlike the vacuum cleaner, the radio, or the bicycle, which retain their use value when everyone has one, the car, like a villa by the sea, is only desirable and useful insofar as the masses don’t have one. That is how in both conception and original purpose, the car is a luxury good. And the essence of luxury is that it cannot be democratized. If everyone can have luxury, no one gets any advantages from it. On the contrary, everyone diddles, cheats, and frustrates everyone else, and is diddled, cheated, and frustrated in return. . . . Like the beach house, doesn’t a car occupy scarce space? Doesn’t it deprive the others who use the roads (pedestrians, cyclists, streetcar, and bus drivers)? Doesn’t it lose its use value when everyone uses his or her own? And yet there are plenty of politicians who insist that every family has the right to at least one car and that it’s up to the “government” to make it possible for everyone to park conveniently, drive easily in the city, and go on holiday at the same time as everyone else, going 70 mph on the roads to vacation spots. . . . Mass motoring effects an absolute triumph of bourgeois ideology on the level of daily life. It gives and supports in everyone the illusion that each individual can seek his or her own benefit at the expense of everyone else. . . . The automobile is the paradoxical example of a luxury object that has been devalued by its own spread. But this practical devaluation has not yet been followed by an ideological devaluation. The myth of the pleasure and benefit of the car persists.[9]

In Belgium, the plea for more paved and concrete roads came from wealthy pressure groups, which grew out of cycling tourist associations— as with owning a car, having a bicycle was, in the nineteenth century, not an option for everyone.[10] Almost like kindred avant-garde spirits— or predecessors— of Filippo Marinetti and the futurists, these rentiers, businessmen, and nobility strove for a total right to speed and for a modernization of the existing, often very unsuitable roads, unpaved or constructed with irregular cobblestones. When in 1896 the Automobile Club de Belgique was established, only one of the founding members possessed a car.

In 1898, the group organized a race, over a distance of 150 kilometers, between Brussels and Spa, the city where in 1921 the motor-racing circuit of Francorchamps was inaugurated. The poster for the event of 1898 shows an old man in a blood-red robe—both Father Time and the Grim Reaper—sitting in an automobile, in his right hand an hourglass, in his left hand a scythe. The dangers of driving a fast car were, apparently, part of the fun, and death was inextricably linked with driving. The winner of the race was Baron Pierre de Crawhez, the president of the Automobile Club.

French author Octave Mirbeau wasn't a member of that gentlemen's association, but he could have been. In 1907, he published the novel La 628-E8—the title refers to the license plate of his car, a four-cylinder produced in 1904 by the French constructor Fernand Charron, in which he had traveled through France, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, accompanied by a driver who could act, if necessary, as a mechanic. Mirbeau was as mocking of Belgium as Baudelaire some four decades earlier, though he wrote with more satire, and he was able to enjoy his privileges. His travelogue—an elongated ode to the car—shows that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Belgium was anything but a drive-thru nation, as this episode indicates, with the author on his way to Antwerp:

> Near Mechelen, oh joy! Teams of workers are removing the cobblestones. . . . From now on, I suppose, we are going to roll on the elastic silk of a brand-new macadam. . . . Suddenly, a violent jolt threw us against each other. The car sank, to the hubs, in a quagmire. It rages, rumbles and smokes, helpless. A burst water pipe has, in this spot, softened, sunk the ground, and transformed the road into a lake of sticky and deep mud. . . . We need the help, a little humiliating, of two horses, to pull the carriage full throttle out of this pothole. And the cobblestones resume their agonizing undulations. . . . Ah! These roads! . . . These roads![11]

Once in Antwerp, in the main shopping street, Mirbeau's car is an instant attraction.

> Am I to believe that there are or that there pass so few automobiles in Antwerp, that ours is such a new spectacle, or such a rare one? It would be surprising. It caused a sensation, there is no denying it; it even caused a scandal. People look

> at it, with a kind of troubled curiosity, like an unknown beast, of which they don't know whether it is gentle or nasty, whether it bites or allows itself to be caressed. . . . Then, after a few minutes, it is a real crowd that, moment after moment, grows bigger and bigger. People summon up the courage to touch the chassis, then they play with the gear lever, the handbrake, the clutch, until they even undo the bonnet catches. Soon, we can no longer distinguish the confused heads, and we only see undulations, eddies, a moving, surging surface, from which murmurs rise.[12]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, automobiles were something to behold. In 1900, 715 Belgians owned a car, out of a population of nearly 7 million. In 1913, that number had risen to 10,168 (while 6,090 inhabitants owned a motorbike, and 522,827 had a bicycle). By 1950, the car had become dominant on Belgian roads, with 273,599 owners. Most of these cars were produced, or assembled, in local branches of foreign companies: Ford Motor Company Belgium opened in 1922 in Antwerp, followed by General Motors (1924) and Chrysler (1926); French companies Citroën and Renault opted, in 1924 and 1925, for Brussels. Since the end of the twentieth century, the closure of some of those factories—Renault, for example, or Ford—because of their move to low- wage countries, has caused some of the deepest traumas on the job market. Nevertheless, in 2021 (with a population of 11.5 million), the national fleet consisted of nearly six million passenger cars— one car for every two inhabitants— with a million more trucks.

The construction of the first Belgian highway, accessible for cars and trucks only, started in 1937, but it was completed as late as 1956. As the only direct connection between Brussels and Ostend, with a length of 105 kilometers, it was— and still is— used intensively, by commuters and tourists. That this Belgian artery leads to the seaside once more shows the origin of automobiles and their infrastructure in leisure and tourism. Initially, this highway, inspired by the American parkway, the Italian autostrada, and the German Autobahn from the early decades of the twentieth century, did cause resistance. During a parliamentary debate in 1936, a politician of the Christian Democratic party was deeply concerned about what he considered as "the construction of a Great Wall of China"— the metaphor strangely alludes to Belgium's future competitor in dominating the view from space— that would divide

Flanders in two separate halves, and for which many would be expropriated: “I can very well understand that those who travel from Brussels to the seacoast to repose themselves find the idea of the motorway excellent, but I also understand that the affected residents deem that idea ludicrous.”[13] Touring clubs joined forces with associations of civil engineers, dreaming of the technological transformation of the landscape. To convince politicians, they emphasized how many jobs the infrastructure work would create, and how beneficial it would be for the logistical operations of industry. Paving the way, however, took time, and the national budget was increased little by little by governments, to be decreased again just before and during the Second World War. When that conflict broke out, a stretch of twenty- eight kilometers had been completed from that first motorway, in the quite unreachable, but also quite empty countryside of Flanders.

It seemed obvious that the highways would be made of asphalt: layers of crushed stone, with a fine crust of tar or bitumen, and sand or gravel-mixed before being laid, contrary to the superposition of materials in macadam, a type of road construction that was developed in the early nineteenth century. Used for the first time in 1870 in New Jersey, asphalt had been invented and patented by Edward De Smedt, a Belgian engineer who had emigrated to work at Columbia University.[14] The problem was that bitumen as a natural material wasn’t available in either Belgium or Congo. Bitumen can also be extracted from petroleum, but Belgium didn’t (and doesn’t) produce oil. The alternative was cement, an important part of concrete that could provide gravel roads with a hard surface crust, and that needn’t be imported. The industry managed to persuade motorists’ associations, and so the first motorway was laid in concrete: two layers of eight and fifteen centimeters, on a layer of thick waterproof paper, and reinforced where necessary. The covering of the first section was so well executed, and so smooth, that it was selected by two motorists for speed tests in 1948: on Belgian soil, British colonel Gardy Gardener and Italian count Miriami managed to reach a speed of 256 kilometers per hour, something they hadn’t managed to do elsewhere.[15] The achievement, however, wasn’t that grand; the worldwide record for land speed was already more than twice as high at the time. Moreover, this excellence of Belgian roads remained exceptional, and cobblestones never disappeared. Today, for designers and factories, the bumpy roads offer a testing ground for evaluating the suspension *of cars, immortalized in the notion of the “Belgian road test,” while the same historic stretches remain as gruesome battlefields during popular cycling races.*

Adaptation, renewal, and expansion of the highway network took off at the start of the 1950s, with money from the Marshall Plan, vehicle taxes, and government loans. In 1949, engineer Henri Hondermarcq became director of the National Department of Bridges and Roads. One year later, he presented his program for 1,000 kilometers of new motorways, mainly located in the northern (and much flatter) half of the country, connecting the major cities. The project was published in 1951 in the Annales des travaux publiques de Belgique, in an article with the lapidary title “The Modernization of the Belgian Road Network.” Hondermarcq’s tone was alarming. Without motorways, he argued, the country would slip into decline: “the government does not seem to realize the considerable damage caused to our economy by such a situation.”16

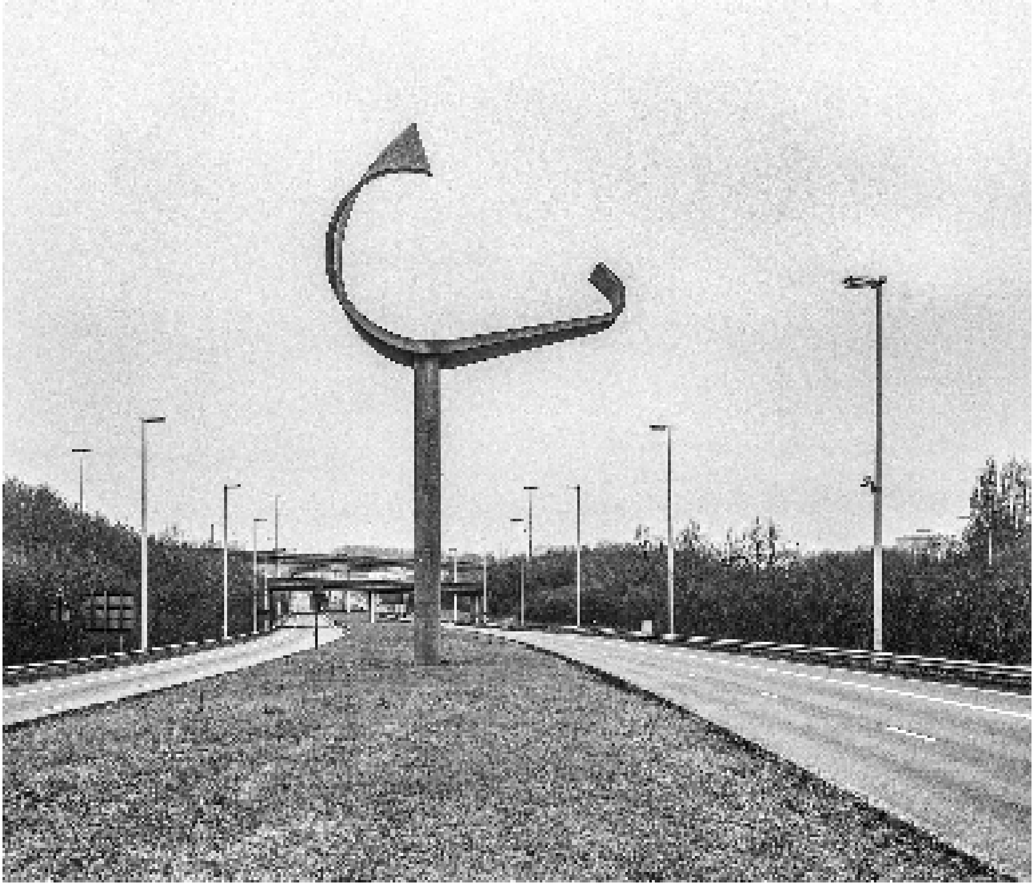
The urgency was also dictated by processes of European integration and unification. In 1950, the Comité des transports intérieurs du Conseil économique pour l’Europe convened in Geneva to agree upon a highway network for the entirety of Europe. The total length was estimated at 58,000 kilometers, connecting twenty- five countries. Each road was designated with a number preceded by the letter E; the road between Brussels and Ostend, for example, would become part of the E40, the longest European route, more than 8,000 kilometers long, connecting Calais in France with Ridder in Kazakhstan. Hondermarcq recreated Belgium as the European drive-thru country par excellence, with Antwerp and Brussels in pole positions. Both cities have ring roads, as two aortas that distribute traffic in all directions— or fail to do so, when traffic is so heavy that it comes to a standstill. Both ring roads, exemplary for the entire network and its evolution during the second half of the twentieth century, have been congested daily more or less since they were put into use. A project to complete the ring around Antwerp— only three quarters of a circle— with a huge viaduct was launched in 2000, but shelved, following a referendum in 2010, and replaced by a project for a tunnel. In Brussels, a project is under way to extend the width of the ring, which has only three lanes in both directions. Whether these interventions will alter Belgium’s position as the European country with the highest number of traffic jams is unsure.

As this brief history indicates, the roads of Belgium were prepared and promoted by lobby groups, rich hobbyists, and powerful industrialists, accounted for by economists, designed by engineers, and— in a final, almost purely administrative phase— approved, budgeted, and signed for by politicians. Architects don't seem to play a role.17 One exception is Jacques Moeschal, an architect and sculptor who designed for Expo 58 the Arrow of Civil Engineering which, at eighty meters long, heralded the power of concrete. Moeschal is also known for the construction of three sculptures along Belgian highways; the first one, completed in 1963, is located along the Brussels ring road, on a median strip in between four lanes, indicating the start of Belgium's first motorway.

It was planned to install another sculpture at the other end, in Ostend, but that didn't happen. The sculpture to the west of Brussels, called Signal, is twenty- three meters high— a hollow column in concrete, without a pedestal, supporting an open- ended curve, poured on site. In 1959, Moeschal wrote a manifesto entitled La route des hommes, with a grand opening sentence: "The road is the most striking indication of how civilized a country is." At the same time, he was aware of the effects the monotony of driving could have:

> Condemned to live for miles at a time according to the rhythm of his car, driving down long ribbons of cement where all forms of life but the mechanical are carefully stripped away, Man experiences, consciously or otherwise, an immeasurable sadness. . . . For the integration of sculpture with the road, the sculptor, in close communion with all those who have worked on it, has the task of symbolizing in an original work the spirit and the endeavor of Man. . . . Unique, free, and transcendent, [these forms] would— by staking out our roads— testify to the fact that even in the century that celebrates the mechanical, the utilitarian, and the prefabricated, the primacy of Man has never been in doubt.18

It is, of course, a false contradiction: if anything expresses "the primacy of Man," it is the mechanical, the utilitarian, and the prefabricated. Moeschal gave the abstract sculpture from 1963 the title Signal, which was— just like his use of the totalizing pronoun



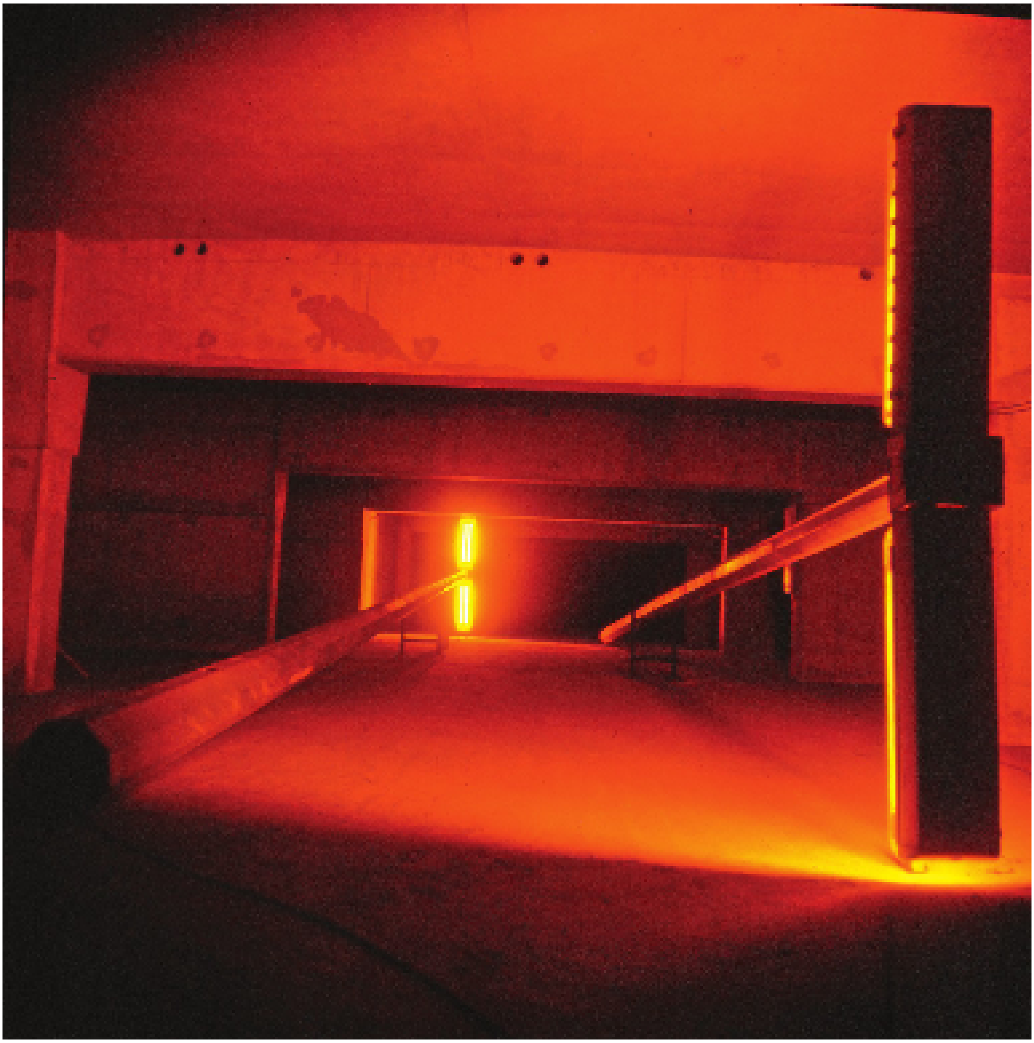
Jacques Moeschal, Signal, Groot- Bijgaarden, 1963. Photograph by Kasper Akhøj, 2021.

“Man” to indicate both the virtue and the well- being of humanity— a sign of the times, radiating the profound belief that anything people create with society in mind— whether that be cars, roads, or sculptures— is positive and meaningful.

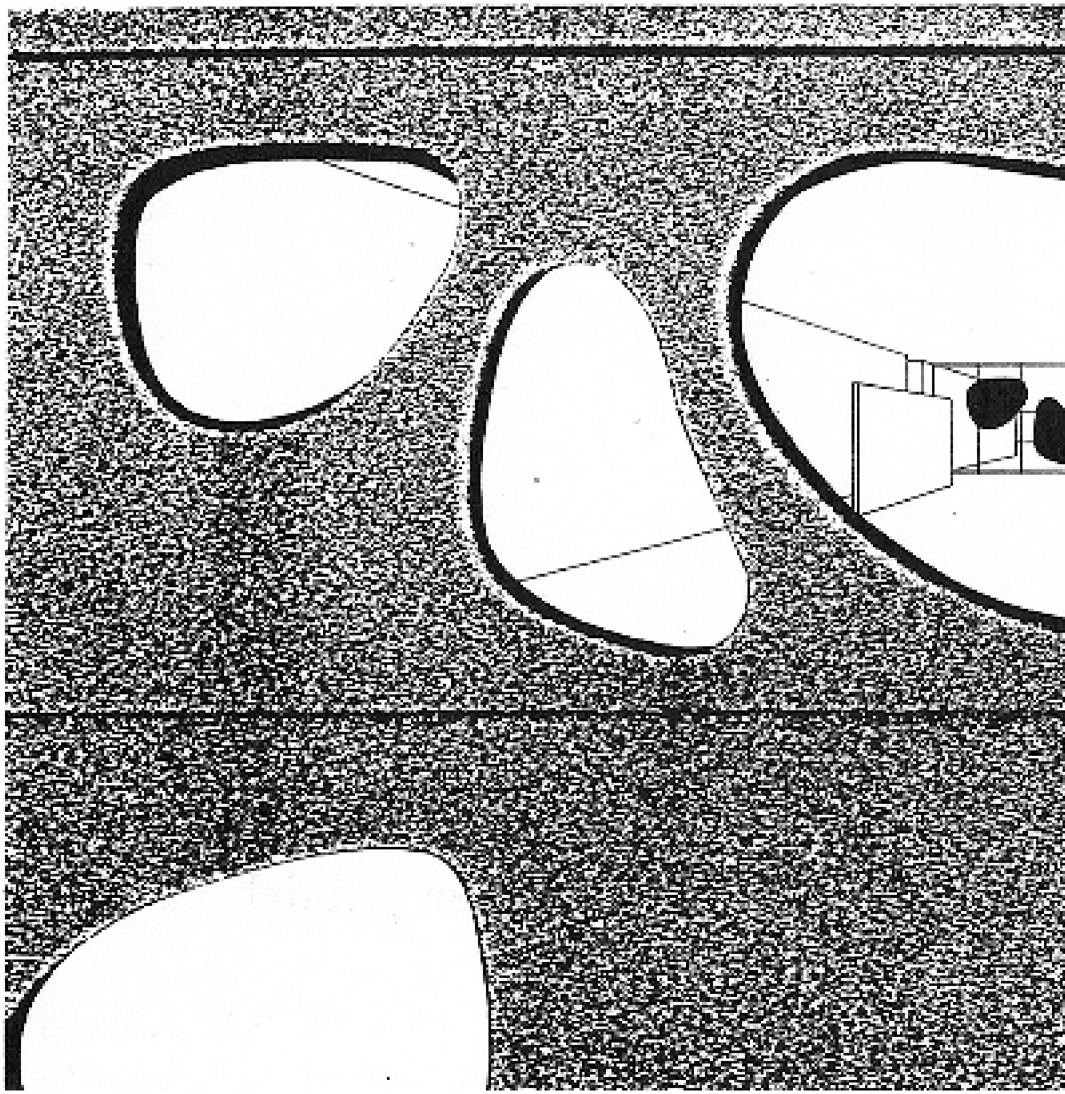
In most photographs of Signal, the unique, clawlike object has to share the skyline with dozens of other vertical elements, all identical, in two rows. The same is true of many other architecture photographs taken in Belgium: there is always at least one lamppost to be seen. The profile of the lamppost— like a gooseneck, or like a human being, head bowed, resigned, chin on chest— is a silent and mostly overlooked witness of most Belgian buildings, and it signals the lateness of architects when it comes to organizing the territory: the most important decisions have been made already. In 1986, Luc Deleu must have been thinking of that when he was invited to contribute to an art exhibition taking place in Liège underneath the Place Saint Lambert, in a concrete labyrinth of spaces, destined to be filled with trams, buses, and cars. Trying to enlighten the minds of the visitors, he realized that this basement also needed to be illuminated to function properly. By putting two lampposts down on their side, he showed the enormous scale of these objects, horizontally: much larger than a doorway, the lamps exceed the size of a human body.

Also testifying to the omnipresence of street lighting is a black- and- white collage playfully made by Stéphane Beel in 1989, when he designed an inner door for the foyer of the deSingel arts center, a building by Léon Stynen, realized between 1964 and 1980, immediately next to the highway in Antwerp. Beel decided to copy the floating, wavy holes in Stynen’s concrete facade— a nod to Le Corbusier’s parliament in Chandigarh— by projecting them as black, potato- shaped stains on the glass panels of the door, as if they had blown through the facade by the force of the car traffic nearby. The lamppost seems to be standing in front of the plane of the drawing, while the concrete facade is like a television screen filled with white noise. Here is one of those many lights that never go out, but this one is urging people to get out of the car, and to enter the arts center.

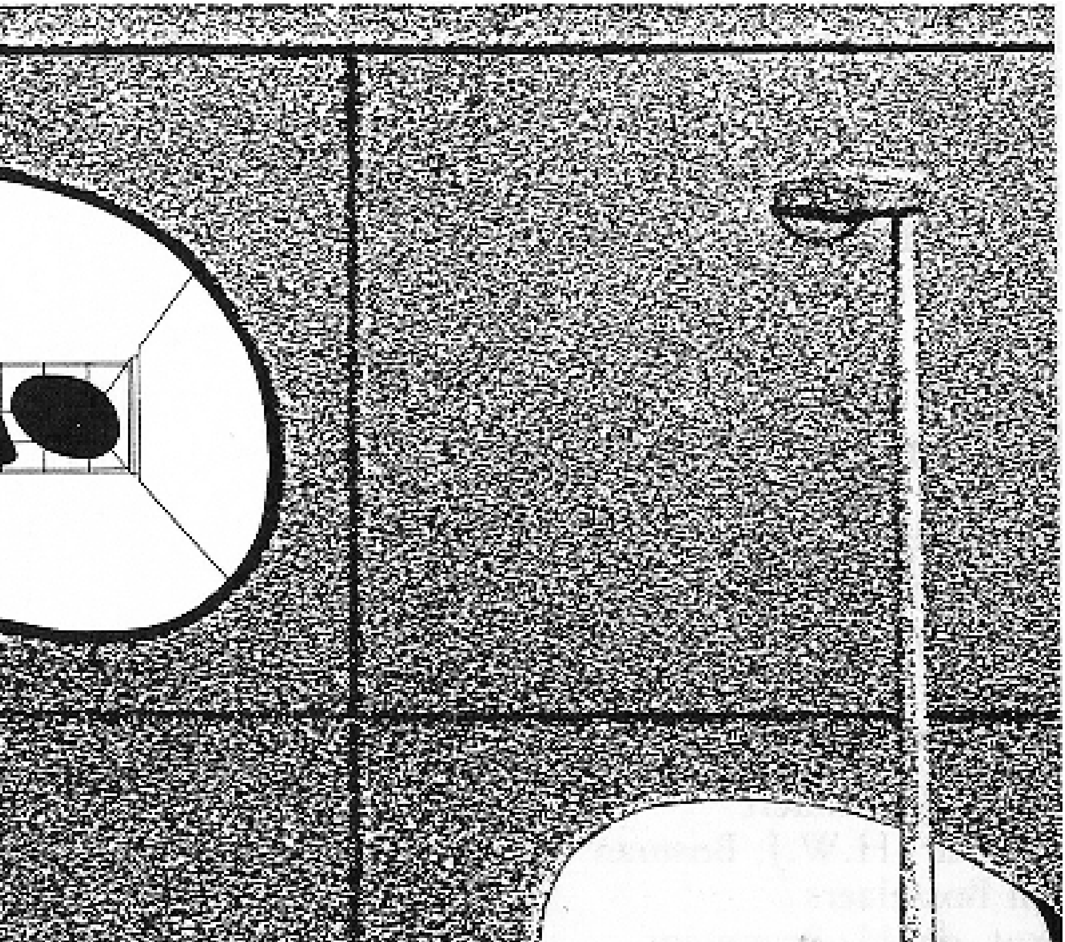
One kilometer westward, on the other side of the spaghetti-like junction of motorways, and very close to the Scheldt, lies another building that is watched over by a lamppost. This is an area that was filled with sheds and moorings during the first half of the twentieth century; the American Petroleum Company, a



Luc Deleu / T.O.P. Office, Scale and Perspective, Liège, 1986. Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.

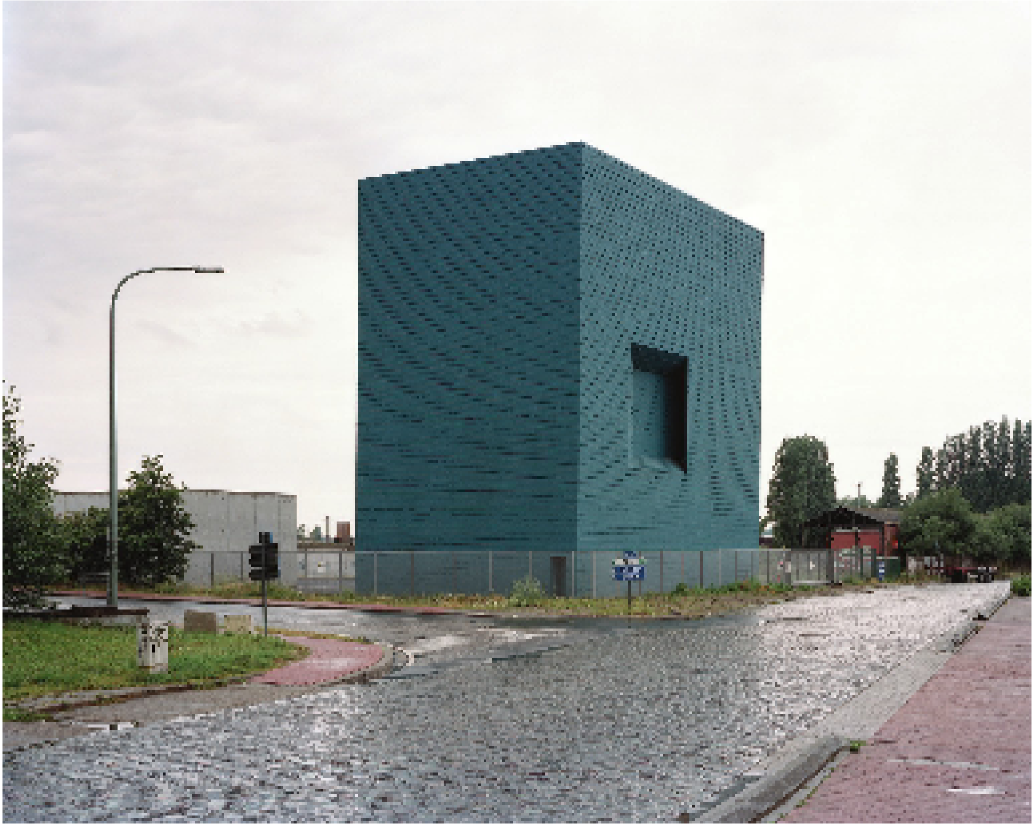


Stéphane Beel, Extension deSingel, Antwerp, 1989, collage. Private collection.



forerunner of Exxon Mobil, hoped to turn Antwerp into the capital of the European petroleum industry, with financial support, of course, from the city council. After the Second World War, companies moved away from the city, and the area fell into disrepair. On an empty corner site, the Belgian transmission system operator for high- voltage electricity decided to build a new substation to convert high voltage to medium voltage, which is then distributed to smaller buildings. The city council longed for a marker in the landscape that could accompany the redevelopment of this area, with housing on one side and new ecological industries on the other side. The architects of noA, who won the competition in 2004, decided to stack the installations to a height of twenty-three meters— exactly the same as Moeschal's Signal, by coincidence. Only the transformers are outside, behind the cubelike concrete volume.

Its mass—painted in petroleum blue, a color wavering between black and green— has a strong aura; from the motorway loops, it gradually reveals itself, in a vague, both comic and ominous way. The front facade, twenty- four meters wide and facing the Scheldt, has one large blind opening that lets fresh air in, like a giant gill.19 The rear facade is pierced with a grid of twenty small black square ventilation holes. The concrete was poured on site in a formwork of untreated wooden planks; joints have made it bulge a little bit, leaving streaks across the entire beam, though not uniformly: it's as if lined paper has faded after repeated duplication. The cross-section confirms an unlikely suspicion: this substation is not neatly perpendicular, but leans slightly forward in the direction of the Scheldt, as if it finds that subsided position more comfortable or more balanced. The strange thing about the lamppost nearby is, of course, that it gets powered by the blue cube that it illuminates—the very primal source of energy remains, as usual, invisible. Equally hidden lies, fifty meters below and a hundred meters to the right, the Kennedy Tunnel, under the Scheldt, 690 meters long—named after the American president John F. Kennedy, and festively opened on Saturday, May 31, 1969, when thousands of pedestrians walked from the right to the left bank on a three- lane road that would, a few hours later, become off- limits except to drivers and chauffeurs. Today, this tunnel processes more than 160,000 vehicles daily, and their drivers can, when they pay close attention, catch a glimpse of that piece of architecture, at the



noA, Petrol Substation, Antwerp, 2009. Photograph by Kim Zwarts.

top of the verge, that powers the city, but that also evokes memories of the petroleum most cars still engulf today.

The most extreme yet lucid example of the connection between architecture, cars, and lighting was proposed in 2004 by Wim Cuyvers, when he participated in a competition for a crematorium along the same highway that leads to the substation, some twenty kilometers further down. Cuyvers predicted of the building by Dutch office Claus & Kaan that would be completed in 2008: "At this place of exclusion, a landscape park is . . . being made where burial and dispersal take place: death in greenery and death in silence, silence, the fabricated nature where ducks and swans glide on the pond, where the edges are trimmed neatly and where the noise of the motorway is filtered away (as best as possible) by the overgrown verge. Like the sick and the insane, the dead are doomed to reside in fabricated nature and in silence."20 The project he proposed was different: it refused to gloss over the reality of dying and mourning by means of architectonic pathos, sentiment, or poetry. Nor did it resort to a scenic pastoralism that covers up the artificiality of this situation, as does the constant presence of cars and trucks whizzing by. One photocollage shows the crematorium on the left, with three rows of lampposts and the passing traffic on the right, and with the remainder of the verge in the middle. As a rationalist structure in concrete, open on all sides, it's a machine for incineration but also for saying goodbye. Here, the multiple repetition— of architectural elements, of cars and lights, of uninterrupted noise, but also of the very act of dying and disappearing— reveals the death drive of a society.

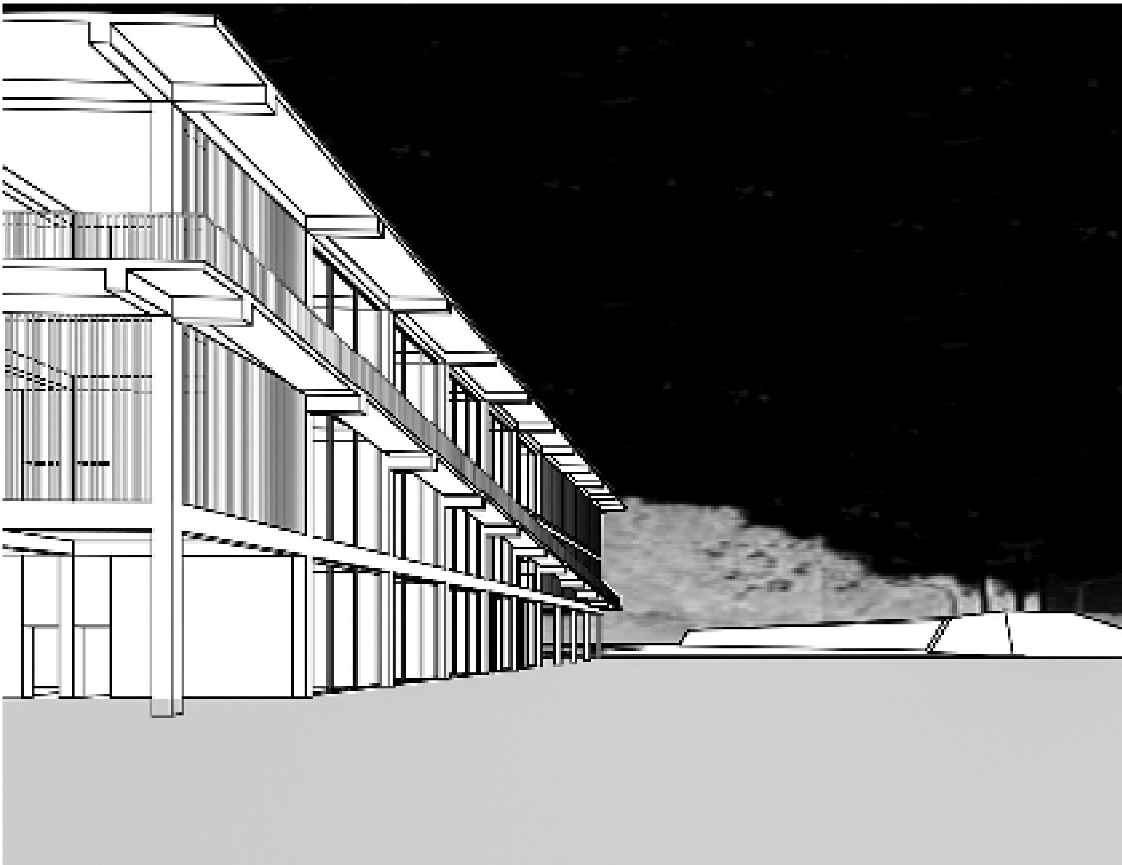
What these projects show is that, although architects haven't participated in planning the movement of Belgium's six million cars, the resulting infrastructure and its users were on their mind. Architecture's audience sits, in many cases, in the driver or passenger seat, and buildings were conceived in anticipation of that perception. In 1988, Willem Jan Neutelings published a monograph entitled The Ring Culture, based on a study of the infrastructure surrounding the city of Antwerp. It was a short theorization of architecture as seen from the motorway, and— more importantly— used by drivers that live outside of big cities. Neutelings's approach was different from that of Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, and John R. Myer in The View from the Road from 1965, who hoped to inspire and enlighten engineers by emphasizing the "potential beauty" of their achievements "as contrasted with their current ugliness."21

Almost a quarter of a century later, highways, rings, and roads were considered by Neutelings as a given—a landscape that had become natural without being capable of adjustment. The only thing left to do was to accept it, revel in it, and try to exploit it as a reservoir of activities, and of architectural assignments. Neutelings wrote: “Jogging lanes and event halls, recreational parks and rock temples, DIY markets and motel chains, allotment gardens and furniture paradises, trade fairs and tire centers, sport complexes and commuter garages: mass activities are strung like a necklace around European cities, in between the center and suburbia, along elongated city highways.”[22] As exaggerated and formalized versions of what was already occurring, he put forward five typologies: a city vestibule as a “transit machine” for commuters, a distribution hall for logistics, a trade center as coworking space, a hotel for different lengths of stay, and a “communication palace” to organize events.

With all five of them merged, these big buildings are very similar to what OMA/Rem Koolhaas, the office where Neutelings worked, proposed for a competition in 1989. The project dealt with the redevelopment of the southern periphery of Antwerp, and it ended up, in 1995, in S,M,L,XL, under the category “Extra Large.” The title of the chapter, “Dolphins,” was derived from the shape of one part of the Antwerp ring— where roads split and bend, coming out of the Kennedy Tunnel—that indeed looks like an aquatic mammal that has just jumped up from the river.

In Koolhaas’s words, the more desperate aspects of this undertaking— pumping the margins of highway nodes full with activities and architecture—are revealed, as the necklace around the city turns into a noose, tightened by an endless number of drivers, including himself:

> *What if those millions that now in their innocence strangle whole regions with the dumb fact of their simple existence could, instead of being marooned in the perversely flexible labyrinth of late twentieth- century culture— you never know where the next blockage occurs—actually be accommodated? Why not conceive vast bastard cities: gigantic architectural accumulations, huge buffer buildings, urban outposts beyond the city, urban obstacles that simply absorb all the flows, swallow the goods, the cars, the people from wherever they come? Highways could suddenly terminate*

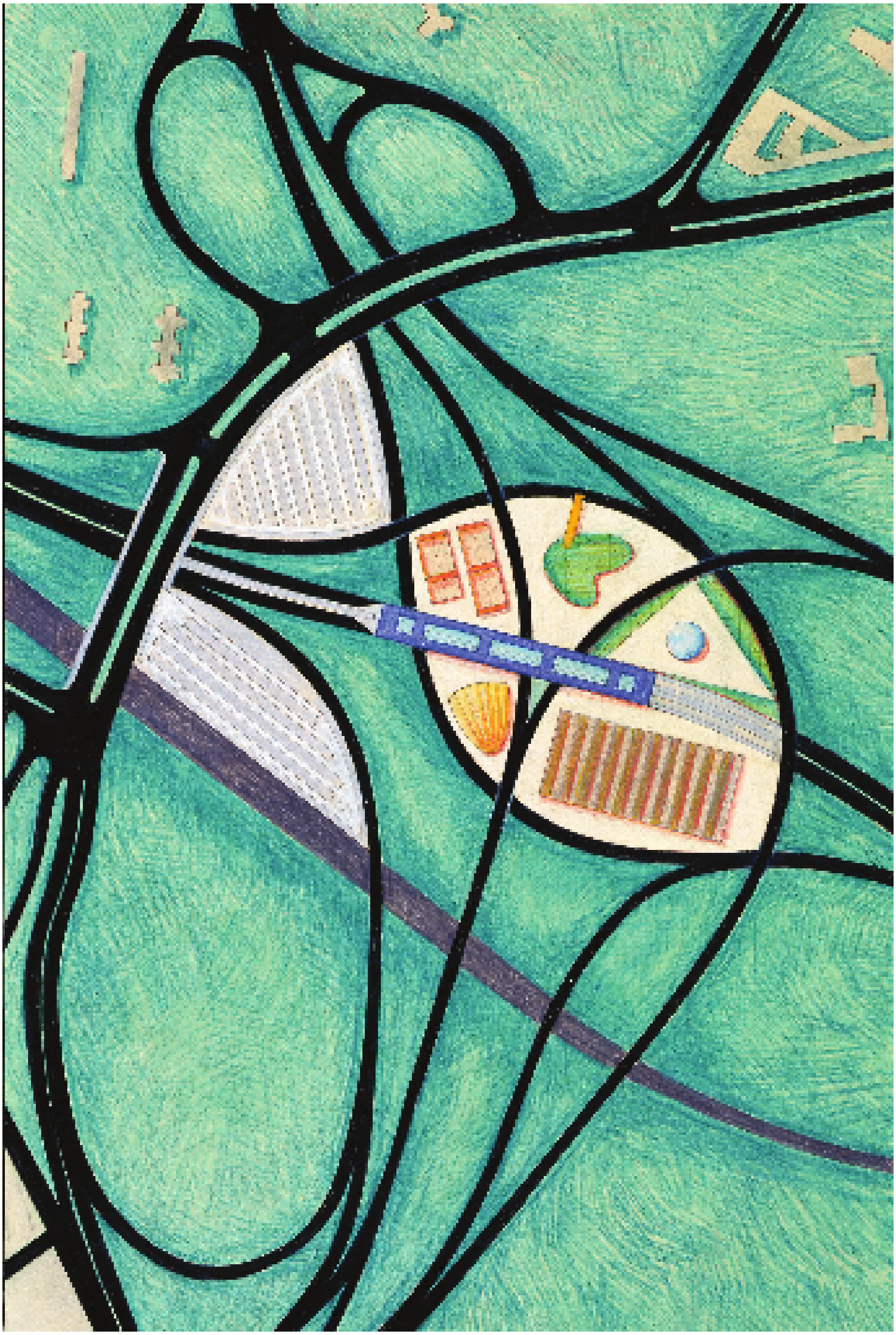


Wim Cuyvers, Crematorium, Sint-Niklaas, 2004.

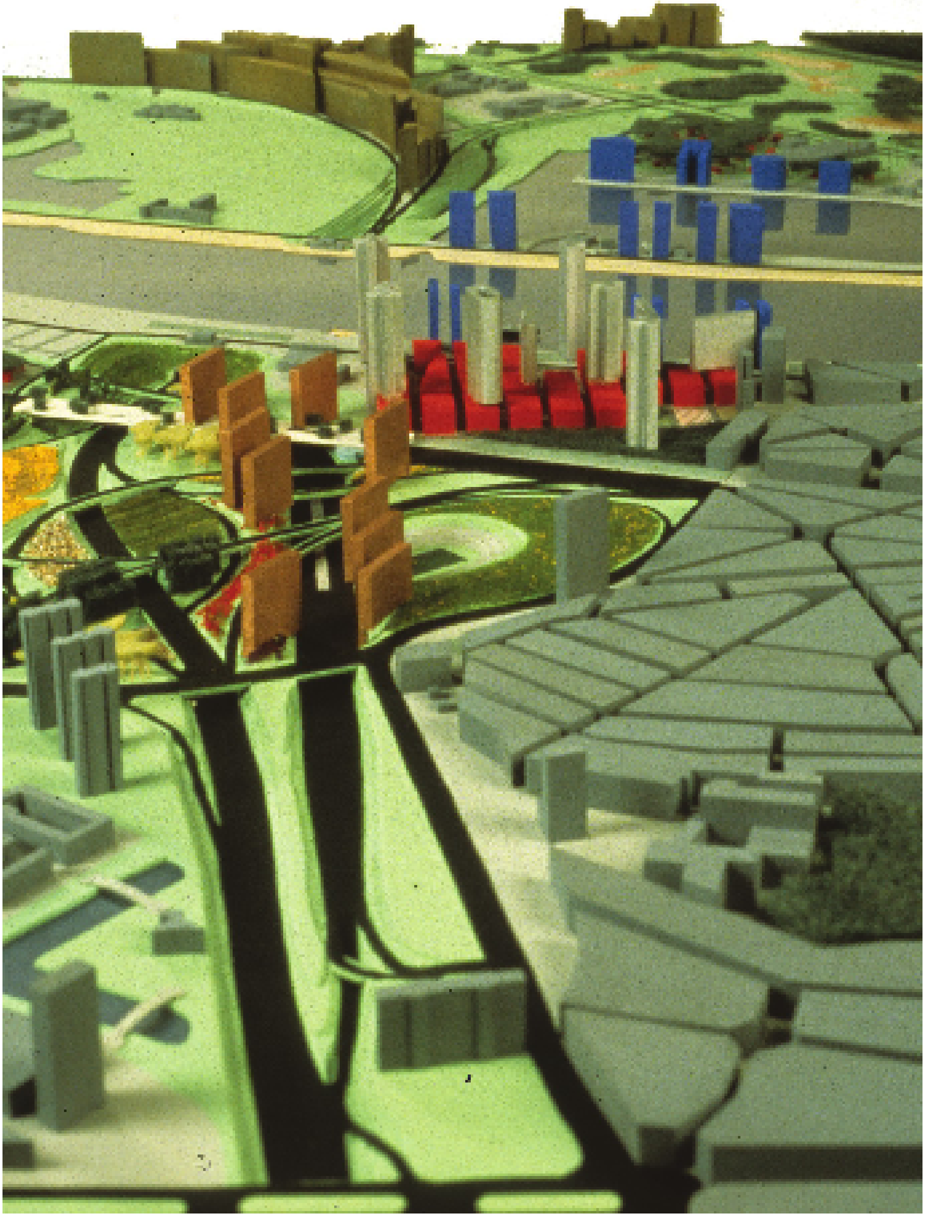
> in them; they might be used to park cheaply, then to take trains, trams, buses, or whatever survivors of a more collective period, to the center— to transfer from whatever to wherever . . .23

This didn't happen, or not that way. The rise of the car caused the proliferation of the architectural type of the garage, not as a collective superblock, but in millions of cases as an annex to a freestanding house. It has been suggested that the first garage ever, of this type, was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Robie House, built in Chicago between 1909 and 1910.24 Frederick Robie was the son of a bicycle manufacturer, but he was trying to convince his father to start producing automobiles. He conceived an experimental motorcar all by himself, and his wife Lora was one of the first women to drive a car in America. The Robie House, built in red masonry brick, is a large piece of low, horizontal architecture. The living quarters as well as the entrance are all on the left side of the site, while the service spaces are on the right. An iron double gate in the garden wall, with horizontal lozenges at eye level, leads to the generous garage court, while the garage itself can house three vehicles behind three identical double doors, with windows at the top.

There is a counterpart of this house in Belgium, with—notwithstanding differences—similar properties; it's from the same date, and it's equally canonical, although it has never been regarded with an emphasis on the car. The Stoclet Palace was built between 1905 and 1911 in Brussels and designed by Austrian architect Josef Hoffmann. The commissioner of the building, Adolphe Stoclet, was born in 1871, eight years before Frederick Robie. Stoclet was also an engineer, but with an expertise in a different kind of transport: he was employed by Italian and Austrian railway companies. It was in this capacity that he became acquainted with the work of Hoffmann and the Wiener Secession. His wife, Suzanne Stevens, grew up in a family of art critics, painters, and art collectors; she was the aunt of French architect Robert Mallet-Stevens. When both his father and brother died unexpectedly in 1904, Adolphe became director of the Société Générale de Belgique, the most important bank and investment company ever on Belgian soil, which, at the height of its power, controlled almost half of the industrial patrimony, including arms producers and mines in Congo. Stoclet settled in Brussels and had a mansion built for



Willem Jan Neutelings, Ringcultuur, 1988. Archives Neutelings Riedijk Architects, Rotterdam.

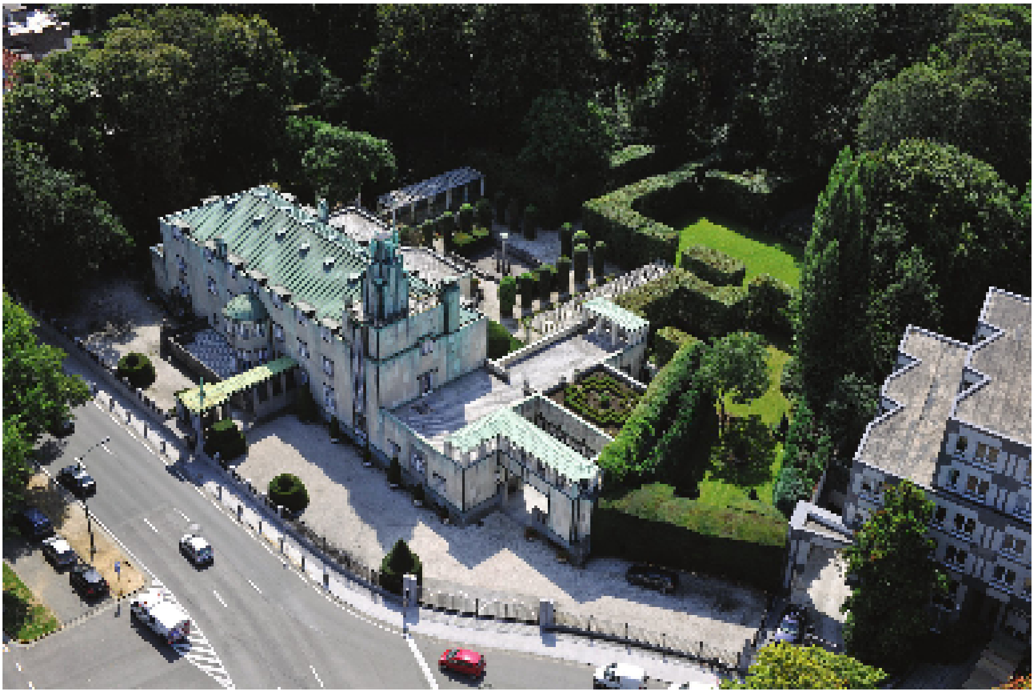


OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Stad aan de Stroom, Antwerp, 1989. Archives Geert Bekaert, Ghent University.

his family—an utterly sophisticated house and a hypertrophy of everything that was dear to the Wiener Werkstätte (but was too extreme to be built in Vienna), as famously demonstrated by the three large mosaic friezes by Gustav Klimt in the dining room. Appearance is key, and if there is a truth, it has to be concealed: every aspect of the structure and construction, as well as the mass and the weight of all the materials used, remained hidden from view. The cladding of white Norwegian Turilli marble (the original idea was to use glass panels) seems to obtain a life of its own, resulting in an almost complete dematerialization of the architecture— an infringement of tectonics if there ever was one. "The facade lies, and it may be right to do so," one member of a group of Belgian architects quipped during a visit in 1912.25 It is testimony to a dream of living— with the amenities of country life, a fairly undisturbed privacy, and a relative proximity to the city— that, two world wars later, would spread all over the territory, albeit on a smaller scale, and in a democratized, watered- down, and, in most cases, plain ugly version.

In the Stoclet Palace, cars have a similar position as in the Robie House. Similarly on the right side of the site, there is a wide gate in the fence, opposite the doors to the garage, and flanked by two conically clipped yew trees.26 In fact, there are two outdoor spaces: a large esplanade or front yard, separated from the street by fencing, and a smaller inner courtyard, with an outdoor service staircase.

In Hoffmann's composition, a rectangular arch creates the distinction between the two, forming a second gate, with a pergola on top, to make sure that the garage remains a part of the volume of the house— one room among many, so to speak. Although that room is located at the edge of the plot, it is crucial: rather than being the door for pedestrians, it is the entrance gate for cars and is oriented toward the oblong square along the Avenue de Tervuren, a boulevard paved at the instigation of Leopold II. Arriving from the city center of Brussels, this is what you see: the short right side of the house with the garage gate (with, in the background, the small tower), while the extended side, parallel to the Avenue, reveals itself slowly. That reception was very important, to the extent that it was the raison d'être of the house: the Stoclet- Stevens family had an important collection of Egyptian statues, Italian paintings, and Japanese prints; their house was accommodated with a small theater; they organized artistic soirées and received



Josef Hoffmann, Stoclet Palace, Brussels, 1911. Photograph by Wim Robberechts, 2010.

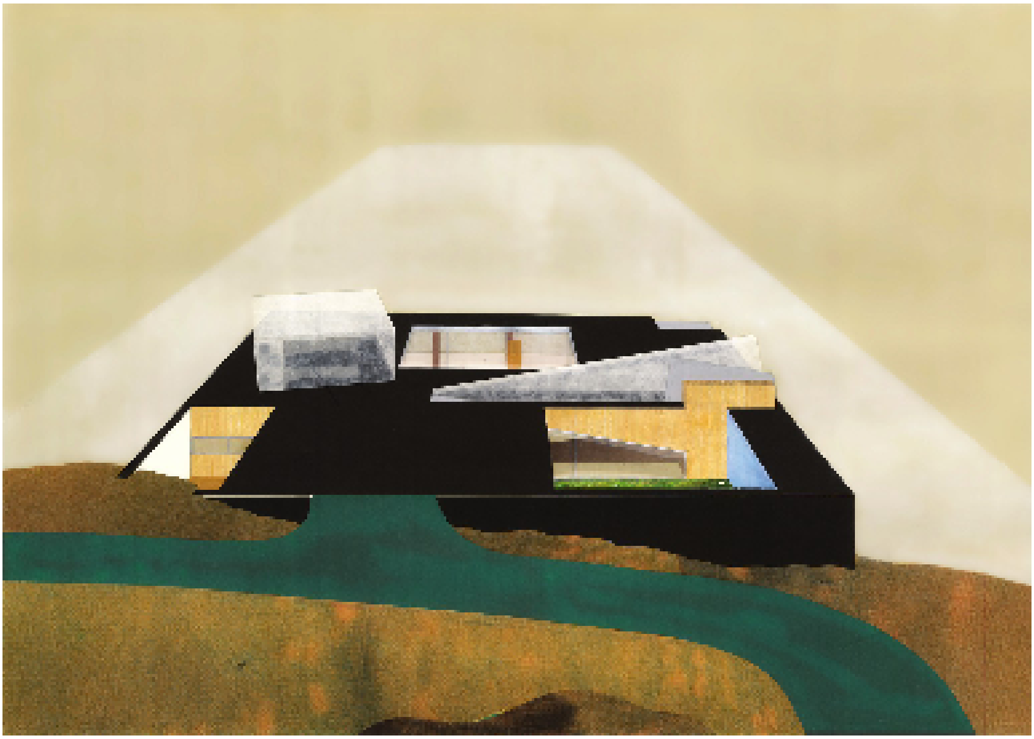
hundreds of notables, architects, and artists, among them Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Diaghilev, Jean Cocteau, Auguste Perret, and H. P. Berlage— visitors who would have arrived by car more and more often as time went on. In 1954, the entrance porch and the gate were enlarged, following the acquisition of the neighboring plot.

By then, to live with a car under one roof had become the norm, but a distance— understandably—remained. Eighty years after the completion of the Stoclet Palace, Xaveer De Geyter designed a house that showcases the widespread suburban dependence on the car in a cool and hyperconscious way, but that also bears witness to the “democratization” of single-family living as well as to the diminution of its scale and grandeur. Possessing a palace with a garden (and a garage) was, for the Stoclet family at the beginning of the twentieth century, extreme and exceptional; in the fin-de-siècle years of the 1990s, that kind of ownership had become, for enlightened clients and their architects, a privilege that was no longer experienced as such, because it was shared by a majority of the population. André Gorz’s connection between the car and the villa as luxury goods invented for the exclusive pleasure of a very rich minority causes a crackling short circuit here, in a moment in history when it was socially expected that every middle-class family would own not only a detached house but also a car, often one for each adult family member. While the place for the car and its importance for the inhabitants did not decrease, that was, of course, the case for the space, both literally and figuratively, in which these updated dreams of dwelling could unfold, not as an invitation for analysis and criticism, but rather as its combined result.[27]

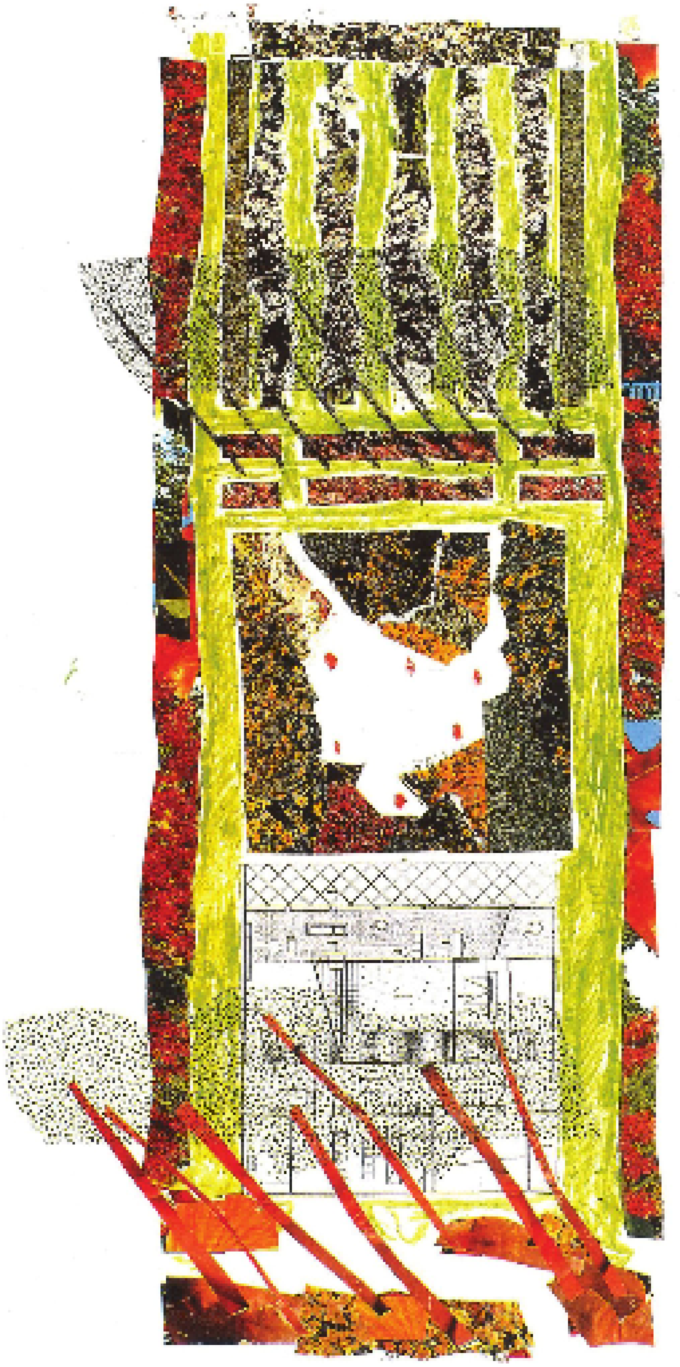
De Geyter’s project, the Villa Brasschaat, was made for a family with two teenagers, and the way the parents and children live apart together, with separate apartments on the same floor, is reminiscent of the Villa dall’Ava he was building in a Parisian suburb as project architect for OMA/Rem Koolhaas. The division between generations is equally unorthodox as the separation between the car and its users, organized along a horizontal line rather than, as usual for detached houses, along a vertical one. That is also the case in the Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier from 1931, the most famous example of the cohabitation of automobiles and residents. There, cars inhabit the ground floor; in the villa in Brasschaat, that order is put upside-down: human life takes place downstairs, while the cars remain upstairs. This is possible because the house is partially dug into a small pine-covered dune, and coming from the road, it's accessible from the top down only. A red-and-white striped barrier closes off the narrow concrete access ramp from the street. Cars can cruise through the pines and drive on top of the roof, to be parked outside or in the garage, which has walls of vertically arranged thin oblong blocks of greenish glass. A steel crash barrier prevents them from plunging into one of the patios. A shortcut—a simple stair—leads down to the kitchen from the glass garage. A more ceremonial entrance ramp slides from the parking roof down into the center of the house, marking the distinction between the living quarters of the parents and those of the children. The ramp is covered by a sloping volume, clad in aluminum, pierced with small circular openings, and crowned with a crooked chimney.

The atmosphere on this platform, especially at night, is not typically suburban, to say the least. Although most residents of Brasschaat—a rich villa district, considered Antwerp's Versailles—might not feel very welcome here, let alone at home, their car would probably feel like a fish in the water, with the garage acting as a radiant aquarium. The roof of this house—representative facade, entrance, and parking lot, all at the same time—sends the car back to where it came from: the motorway. Parking one's car before entering this villa is like stopping for a police alcohol test, or like embarking on a clandestine submarine. The landscape, meanwhile, reinforces that impression. The garden was designed by OMA collaborator Yves Brunier, and it is laid out in a simultaneously exuberant and laconic way—as a double repetition of the floor plan of the house. While this creates a remarkable perspective from the living quarters downstairs due to the montage of compositional patterns, from the vantage point of the platform, the density of greenery and trees all around, no matter how thin or illusory, once more emphasizes how this kind of suburban house, as well as the motorways it is dependent upon, has been carved out of a territory that was not so long ago rural and green in nature—the kind of environment that the connection between the car and the house both longs for and destroys.

The next phase in the by now century-long marriage between drive-thru nation Belgium and the car takes place, during the first decades of the twenty-first century, in the city. Or rather: it doesn't, and that's the point. In 1973, André Gorz was pessimistic about the future of cities, designating them as the places par excellence where cars accumulate: "If the car is to prevail, there's still one



Xaveer De Geyter, Villa Brasschaat, Antwerp, 1989, collage.



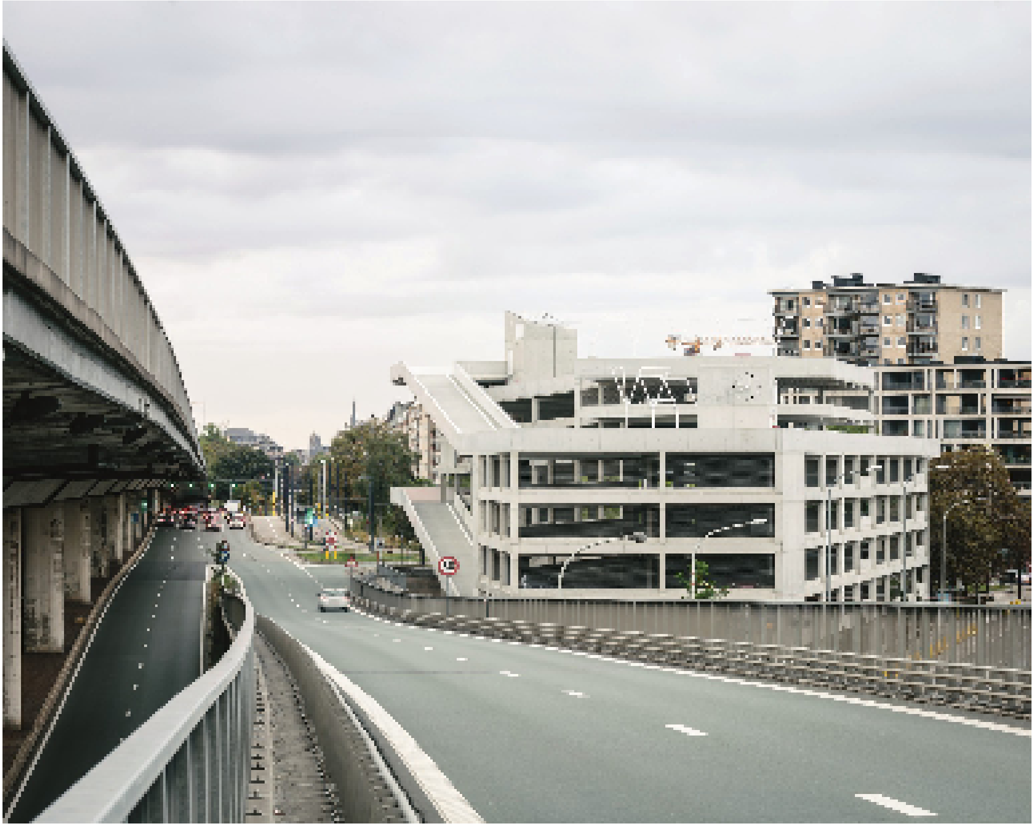
Yves Brunier, Villa Brasschaat, garden, Antwerp, 1989, collage.

solution: get rid of the cities. . . . The car has made the big city uninhabitable. It has made it stinking, noisy, suffocating, dusty, so congested that nobody wants to go out in the evening anymore. Thus, since cars have killed the city, we need faster cars to escape on superhighways to suburbs that are even farther away."28 The solution Gorz proposed was apparently antiurban. Since he didn't believe in the merits of mass transportation either, he was convinced— in a plea close to what Jane Jacobs argued for as early as 1961 in The Death and Life of Great American Cities— that people should stop moving around. This standstill could take place in "their neighborhoods, their community, their human- sized cities."29 To a certain degree, Gorz's prediction from 1973 came true, half a century later: a lot of cities are banishing the car, but mainly because city dwellers, increasingly well- off, have the means to do without them. More than a century after the rich got their kicks by organizing races, the true luxury resides in being able to live in the city without a car. Belgium remains a drive- thru nation, but its cities have become out of bounds. The mid- size city of Ghent is a case in point. Governed by a coalition of Socialists and ecologists since 2012, Ghent has been made difficult to move about in by car. Based on a circulation plan that came into effect in 2017, pedestrian zones were extended, some streets were kept free of motorized traffic, parking fees were increased, and it became impossible to use the city as a drive thru, since motorists are continuously diverted to the ring road.

This change has an important implication for that other kind of building for automobiles: the parking garage where cars are parked collectively, cut loose from the domestic sphere. Historically, these buildings were located in city centers, since it's obvious one would want to park one's car close to where all the action is. A well- known example is the Garage Rue de Ponthieu, built in 1906 by Auguste Perret in Paris (and destroyed in 1970), one block away from the Champs- Élysées. Cars were lifted vertically by an elevator and transferred to pallets on horizontal tracks, placing them into a particular parking space. Outside, a large ornamental form of iron, glass, and steel was superimposed on a simple concrete frame.30 In Belgium, it would require the World Expo of 1958— increasing motor traffic, in anticipation of which the inner city of Brussels was restructured— for the parking garage to impose itself. In the 1950s, the multistory car park, made accessible by spiral ramps, had become widespread in the United States.31 A Belgian entrepreneur who, in his capacity as the vice- world- champion water- skier, traveled all around the world had become impressed by these constructions. He decided to finance a similar building in advance of the world's fair with the name Parking 58— five floors, each seventy- five by thirty-one meters—to house a thousand cars in the heart of the city, close to the shopping district. A single spiral ramp handled traffic going up and down. Remarkably—as a feat of engineering— the parking space itself was completely free of columns.[32] The exterior was utterly banal, resembling just another office building; once more, it was sculptor Jacques Moeschal who was invited, in 1967, to embellish this piece of infrastructure with an abstract sign in stainless steel on its facade. At first, Parking 58 was hardly a success: the world expo itself was too far away, and the car wasn't that widespread in Belgium yet. For more than a decade, the garage was rented to Volkswagen, which could temporarily park thousands of Beetles, produced nearby in Vorst, and then distribute them all over the country.[33] Parking 58 was demolished in 2017, and replaced by an office building with an underground garage with some 500 parking spaces.

The parking garage of the twenty- first century is located not in the city but on its edges, not unlike a cloakroom where you leave your coat before entering a different, more agreeable climate. In Ghent, an architectural competition was launched in 2010 for an above-ground parking building for about 500 cars, next to the exit from the motorway connecting Antwerp with Lille. The winning design, a joint effort by the offices Havana and LUsT, was completed in 2022.

Constructed in white concrete, at first sight it reminds one of what has been referred to as the architectural prototype of the parking garage: Le Corbusier's Maison Dom- ino from 1914, itself inspired by a construction system patented in 1892 by François Hennebique.[34] The parking garage in Ghent indeed looks like a set of horizontal concrete slabs held up by columns, like the skeleton of a building waiting to be fleshed out in a nearby, carless world, and reprogrammed to be something completely different. On closer inspection, it is more intricate, and less generic: to keep as much open space around the garage as possible, the building has a minimal footprint, and a plan in the shape of a boomerang, with one wing inclined and the other one flat. The constituent planes, and often the parking spots too, are triangles and parallelograms. Cars that are on the lookout for a space drive up the



Havana/LUsT, Parking Ledeberg, Ghent, 2022. Photograph by Stijn Bollaert.

different ramps, while those leaving drive down. On one of the volumes with stairs and elevators, a clock is installed, transforming this garage into a modern belfry. And on the top floor, lampposts, shaped like pelicans just before takeoff, help drivers to see where they have parked their car.

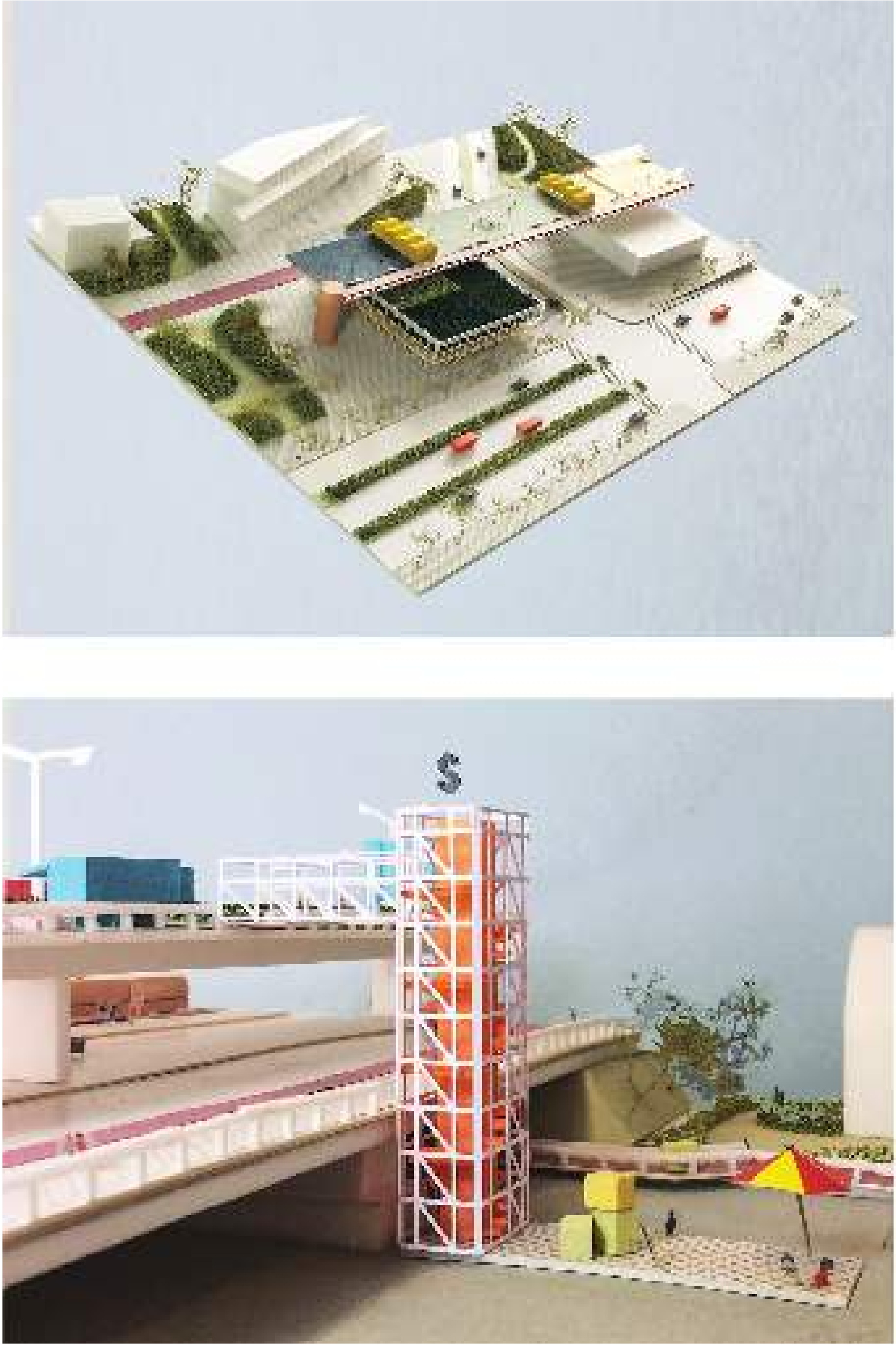
The aim of the garage is to liberate a nearby marketplace from cars, and to transform it from an open-air parking lot into a green public space. The same applies to the city of Ghent in general: the idea is, of course, that whoever wants to visit the city by coming from the motorway can leave the car in here, and then take the tram or the bus to the center. For now, the huge and imposing flyover nearby—it can almost be touched from the top floor of the garage, at about the same height— continues to fulfill that function: it leads directly from the motorway into the city. Since parking facilities are present, it seems reasonable to demolish that piece of infrastructure, built in 1972, with a length of 1.5 kilometers, and in chronic need of repair. A large part of the city park that had to be sacrificed back then could be restored. But it would be a shame, too, to let it go. The flyover offers, after all, a metropolitan way of looking at and approaching the city— of seeing its skyline and understanding and reading its structure. Why should an experience like that be limited to the driver's seat? From an ecological point of view, destroying this type of construction requires energy too. Perhaps surprisingly, a plea for preserving this kind of disused freeway was written in the early 1980s and published posthumously, in the little-known book Wasting Away by Kevin Lynch, the American urban planner who helped to theorize (and justify) cities dominated by cars:

> Public routes through populated areas, if not too specialized (as the elevated train was), and if their continuity is not broken, retain their usefulness for very long periods. The old Roman roads are a good example. So even if a freeway were abandoned, we can imagine many new uses for it. Immediately, of course, we think of movement by other modes: walking, jogging, biking, bus routes, horseback riding, even boating along those that are depressed. In addition, they could be linear parks, and their verges and embankments could be planted to vines, trees, and crops. If elevated, their understructures can be linear buildings, or porticoes, or bulk storage spaces. Linear schools and other

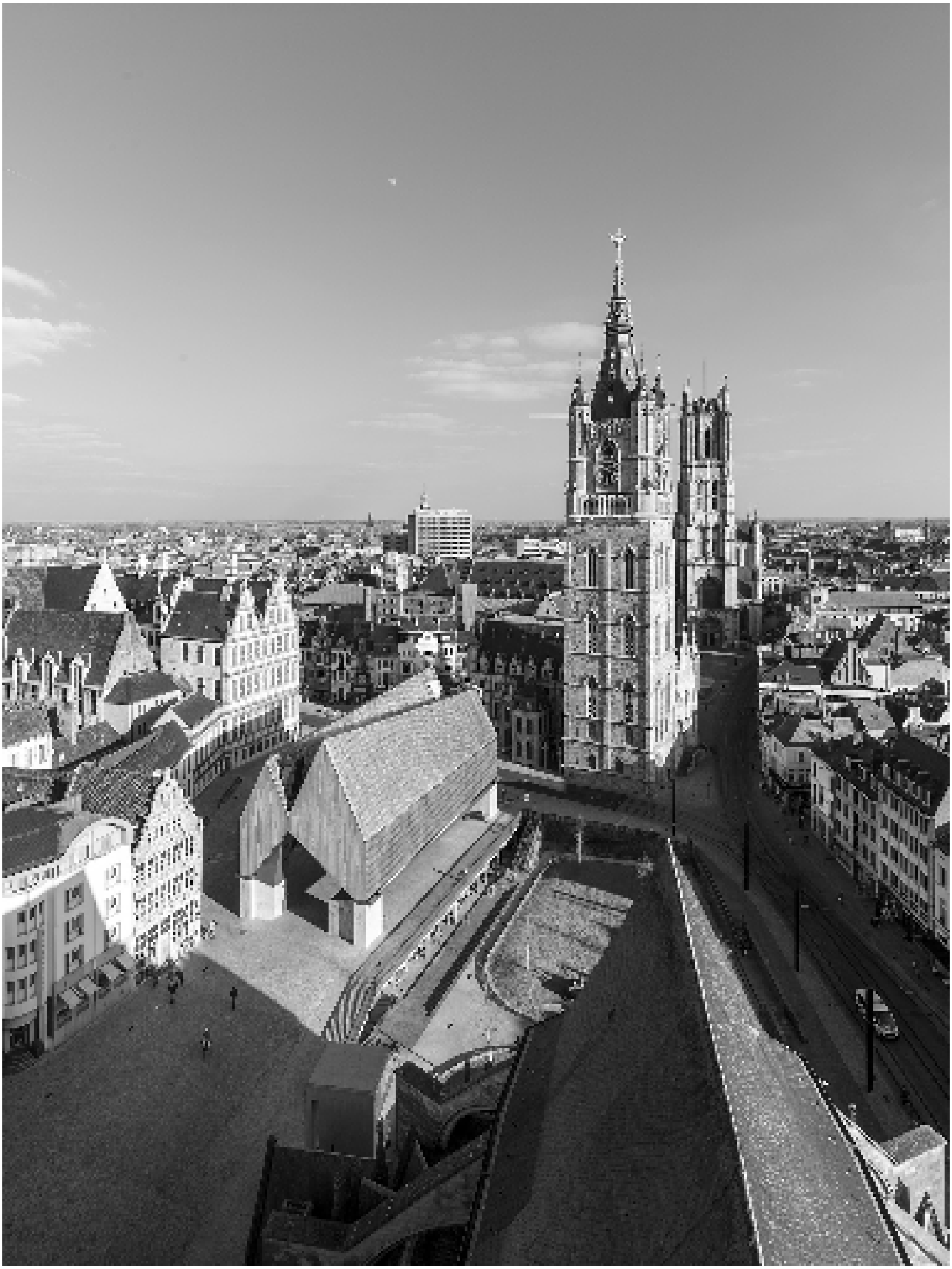
> public facilities could be erected on them. They could be used for active sports: racing, swimming, archery. They could be a place for festivals and processions, or, more humbly, for drying grain or clothes. They might become light airplane landing strips, or long assembly lines. In contrast to the cramped and specialized parking garage, large network spaces tend to have a wide array of use. They should be conserved, and not frittered away.35

Some of the scenarios like those sketched out by Lynch have been put on the table in Ghent. The Brussels office 51N4E was asked to start a participatory project with locals to see how attached they are to the flyover, to its presence and its uses, now or in the future. One prospect is to maintain the overpass, but to cut it short and redefine it as a public promenade. Stairs and elevators could connect the different levels—flyover, the street underneath, as well as a small island in the river Scheldt—revealing a surprising vertical dimension.

In the inner city, meanwhile, cars have become a rarity, and that invokes new and divergent architecture too. Devoid of cars, the architecture of the city has to be reinvented. The Stadshal in Ghent, completed in 2012, succeeds in doing so. It is a large standalone canopy, designed by Paul Robbrecht, Hilde Daem, and Marie-José Van Hee, standing next to the medieval belfry, on a square that came into being as late as 1960, when a very dense block of dilapidated rowhouses was demolished. The liberated space became an open parking lot, very convenient since the city administration is nearby. Fifty years later, the project by Robbrecht, Daem, and Van Hee gives a clear reply to what can happen with an emptied space in a historical city when cars are no longer around, and when filling the square, straightforwardly, with cafe terraces or other touristic or commercial activities, is not considered as the wisest option. The building is innovative because it proves the hypothesis that there is only one pastime that a lot of different people can engage in together, and that is doing nothing—for example, by being en route somewhere, by bike or on foot. The Stadshal provides the perfect backdrop to all that. The zone it creates consists of a leveled and paved ground floor, part of which is covered by an elongated and double gable roof that rests on four sturdy columns. To enter this construction means to swap the open air for the constructed, perforated, or rather plaited roof of a building;



51N4E, Flyover, Ghent, 2019, models.



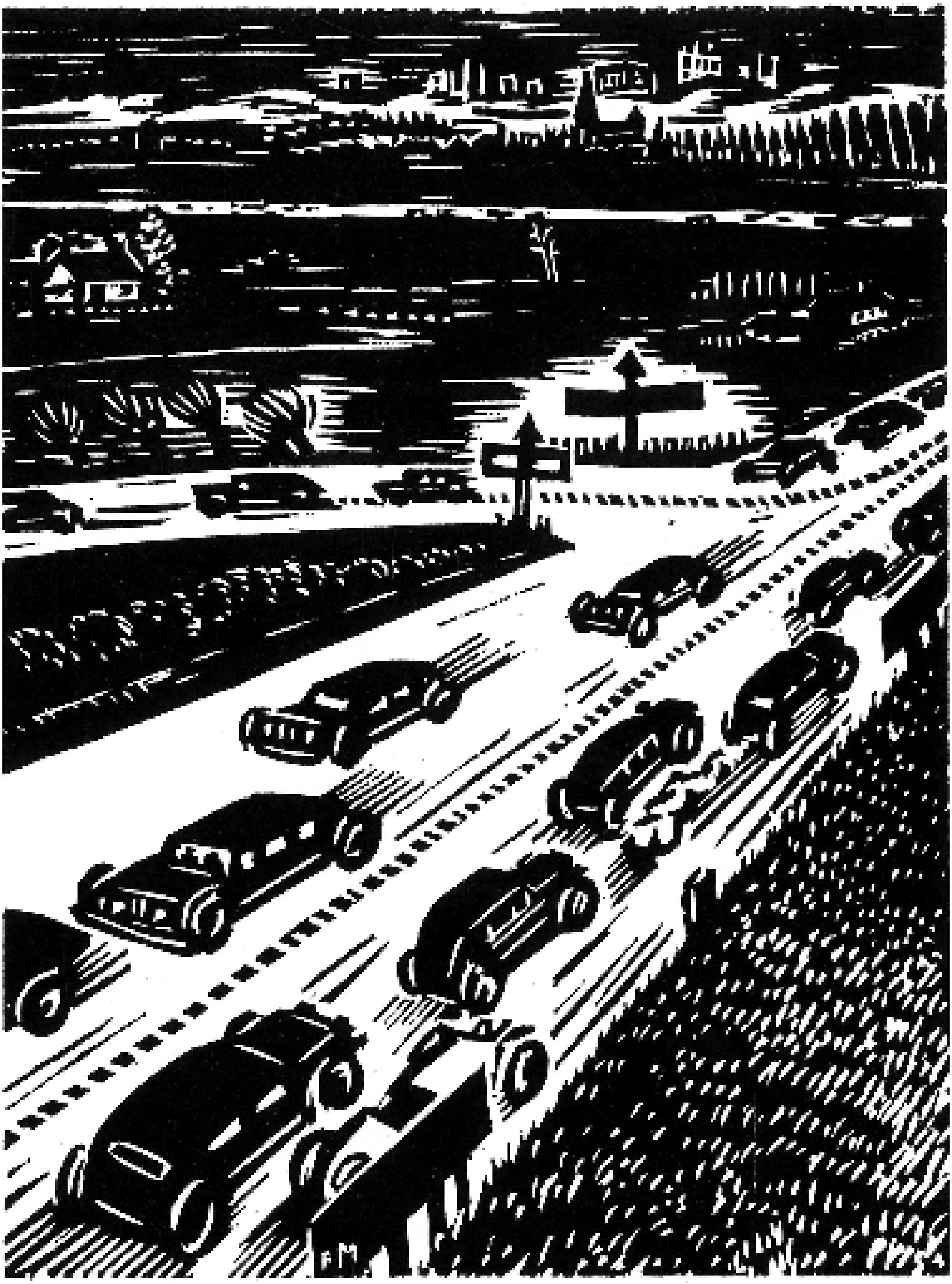
Robbrecht Daem Van Hee, Stadshal Ghent, 2014. Photograph by Marc De Blieck.

the distinction between the open sky and the architectural roof is intensified and turned into something theatrical. The Stadshal reminds one of that old, almost medieval aspect of urban life, predating the car, but also predating the advent of leisure time and the entertainment and culture industries: people go about their own business, do their own thing, and see to their own affairs, economies, and contacts. Mundane, rarely spectacular urban life is given temporary shelter from the rain and is adorned with an otherwise useless embellishment. An ordinary, empty square—the absence of architecture— could not provide this: the moment would pass, the void would be meaningless, and filled up again all too soon, whereas now, around and under the building, ordinary city life keeps going thanks to the short- lived luster it is given. Pedestrians, bicycles, and mopeds all whirl around on the same uninterrupted surface, without prescribed routes, and sometimes not yet used to being so close together. Collisions occur, but they are rarely fatal.

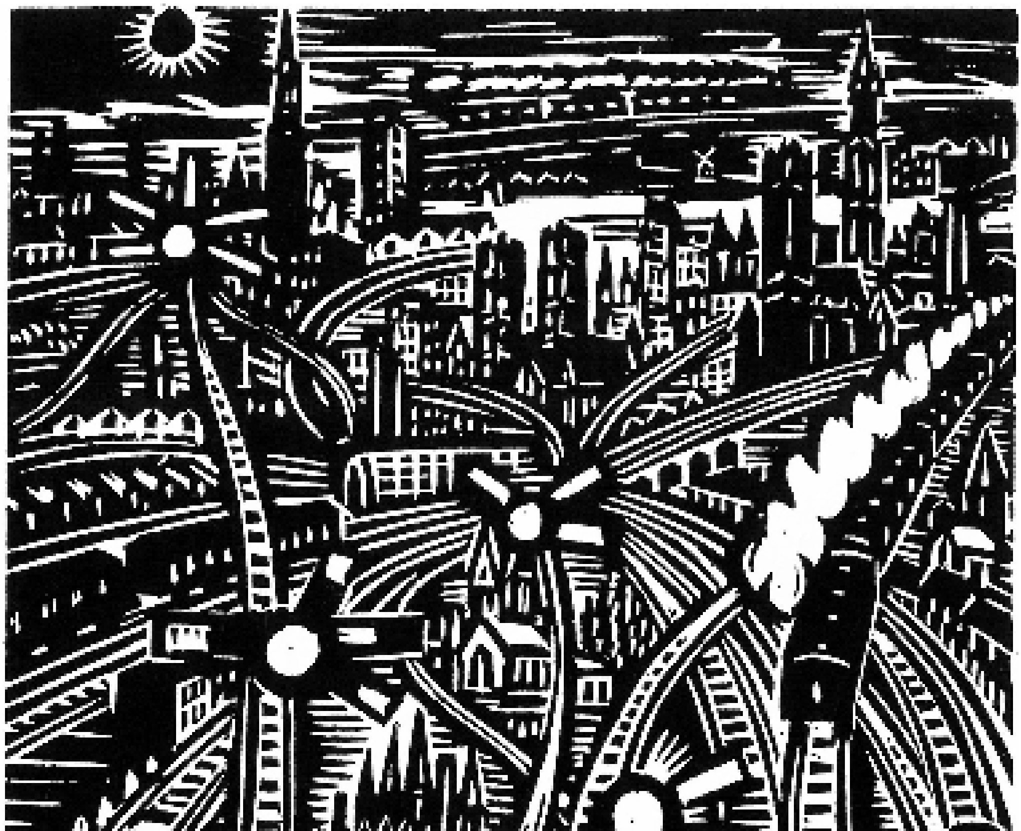
5 Splendid and Full- Blooded Chaos

Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone / All just supply and all relation." Thus did John Donne, in his poem "An Anatomy of the World" from 1611, announce a modern world, in his case Anglican instead of Catholic. The quotation was used as an epigraph by Hugo Claus, the most important postwar Belgian writer, for his last major novel, published in 1996. (The other epigraph— "The ludicrous way the Belgians lurch along"— was taken from Baudelaire.)[1] The novel, entitled The Rumors, deals with a Flemish village in the 1960s to which a prodigal son returns, after fighting in a cruel, shadowy colonial war. In the opening scene, his father is looking out the window at his kitchen garden, the local football field behind, and further away the chimneys of the brewery. This— the typical, not yet (but almost) post-agrarian Belgian landscape, nearly full, divided, and parceled out— is what the father glances at before turning to his homecoming son, "as if he is saying goodbye," Claus writes, "to an order that can no longer be the same."[2]

It's a strange remark. Is this an intervention of the narrator, as a rather ironic description of the fragmented, uneven, and distinctly unorderly view this man shares with his compatriots? And when did that order, which is now apparently under threat, ever exist? What did it look like, and how— or by whom— was it experienced? While the disorder of the Belgian territory had become a



Frans Masereel, Untitled, from Mijn land: Honderd houtsneden (Brussels: Van Hoorick, 1956).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fait accompli by the end of Second World War, its origins can be found in the nineteenth century, when it was not yet the car that was celebrated as the national mode of transport, but the train. Perhaps surprisingly, it’s the railroad that formed Belgium. Two woodcuts by a graphic artist point this out in black and white. Frans Masereel published the book My Country in 1956 to honor, but also critique, the region in which he was born. The woodcut was once popular and approachable, but in the postwar years it was gradually becoming historical and peculiar as a medium. Nevertheless, the hundred images in the volume remain an ambiguous portrait of Belgium, partly outdated, partly topical, but full of the “worldliness, pure delight in the adventure of life,” in “the form of a certain playfulness, a certain irresponsibility,” that Thomas Mann attributed to Masereel’s work.[3] One woodcut from My Country shows a dark landscape in which only the highway lights up, two times two lanes, in opposite directions, separated, or rather held together, by nothing but a dashed line, as if stitched by a sewing machine.

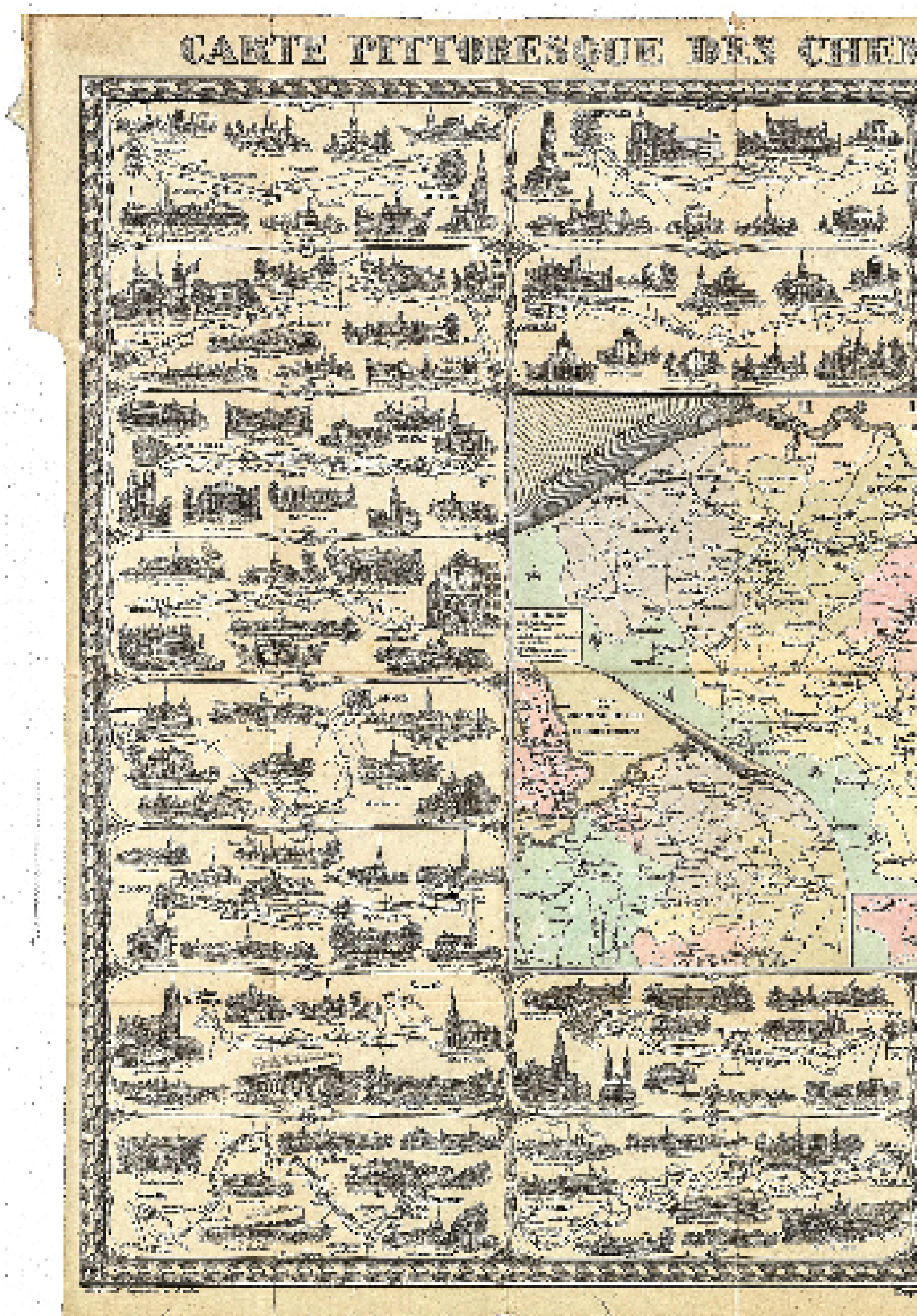
One car has a tail of smoke, as large as the vehicle itself, and reminiscent of all the gas clouds Masereel drew, in his earlier works, in the skies of industrializing cities. An exit leads inland, away from the drawing, while slanting willows indicate the way to go. All other kinds of signs and arrows, often double- armed— they seem at the verge of rotating or reversing, simply because of the unstoppable streams of cars next to them—suggest how relative the very notion of place has become. On the back of one placard, possibly a billboard, Masereel has carved out his initials, so it’s unlikely that one of the speeding drivers will notice them. In the background, a village or a city seems to well up, as a disturbance in the line of the horizon, drawn by a polygraph. Two detached houses are uninhabited, or at least forgotten. Ten pages and as many woodcuts further in My Country, something completely different shows up, much less realistic, with a higher density and a different scale, and with an almost constant alternation between black and white.

Here, the territory is overgrown with train tracks, as if covered with a lace blanket; only between the fine gaps in the network can agglomerations, settlements, cities, and towers—architecture—arise. Trains, with the plumes of smoke acting here like a second floor, come and go; a small black sun breaks modestly through the frame of the drawing; train switches have the almost impossible task of managing all those different trajectories.

A more condensed and essential portrait of Belgium at the onset of the twentieth century does not exist. The country was by then almost completely covered by two rail networks: a national one, connecting the major cities by train, and a regional one, for trams or streetcars, with vehicles of a more modest size. In 1908, the latter amounted to more than 5,000 kilometers— nine times more than in Germany, fourteen times more than in France, and thirty- eight and a half times more than in Great Britain.[4] The result is that there was hardly a village or a settlement that you could not reach with mechanized transport. It was a clear decision immediately after the country's foundation in 1830, as the country's first minister for public works— Jean- Baptiste Nothomb, who fought in the revolution for Belgium's independence— expressed it in a report to the senate in 1839:

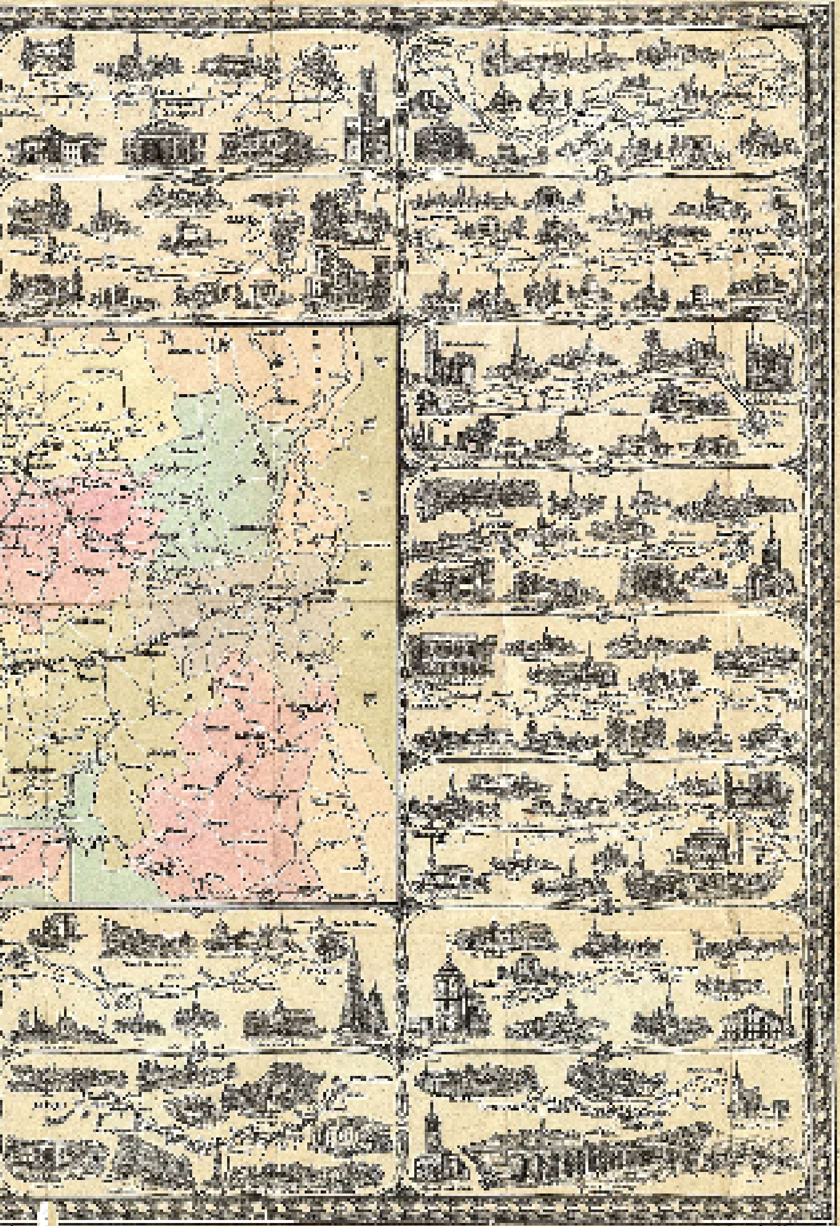
> After having attracted the gaze of Europe on the day of its revolutionary birth, the danger for Belgium was to fade into the crowd of small peoples, but the country remained on stage presenting a great material fact. It continued to be talked about, and that's more important than talking about oneself; all nations are in need of an idea in front of them, a goal, just like individual citizens; this idea, this goal, has been for Belgium . . . the railroad; it's the great national affair; it will be the monument of the reign of the first of its kings. It is perhaps through this that Belgium, while calming its inner turmoil, has been able to escape the boredom that affects even great nations, to which history has lavished the most beautiful memories.[5]

Belgium was a flat territory that seemed to be waiting to be written upon: its founders could, more or less, invent this country and its culture as they saw fit. Inspiration came— just like the first king, Leopold I, a German who had married the English crown princess in 1816— from across the North Sea. Together with Great Britain, Belgium had been industrializing fast, and it was considered an economic necessity to develop a railway network to stay competitive, for example with the Netherlands, which possessed waterways toward Germany that were, because of the nationalist


CARTE PITTORESQUE DES CHEM

Alphonse Wauters, Guillaume-François-Louis Mols, and J. Ongers, Carte pittoresque des chemins de fer de la Belgique, Etablissement géographique de Bruxelles, 1843. Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

HENS DE FER DE LA BELGIQUE.



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bidding typical of the nineteenth century, inaccessible to Belgian trade ships. The first train ride in Belgium, on Sunday, May 5, 1835, was also the first train ride on the European continent. Three trains, all of them produced in Great Britain, ran in convoy one after the other: The Arrow, seven open carriages with benches for people of good descent; The Stephenson, seven open and closed carriages; and The Elephant, sixteen open carriages with benches. The second train was named after George Stephenson, the British engineer who had built the first steam locomotive. He was present at the festive event, standing next to Leopold I, a personal acquaintance— for reasons of safety, it was deemed unwise for the king to travel along, although legend has it that he did jump on one of the carriages, but in disguise.[6]

Hereafter, the train would become decisive for a persistent national policy of dispersion, pursued by successive Catholic and Liberal governments. A widespread network made it possible to distribute the population, as well as all kinds of raw materials and products, equally over the entire territory. Investments in the train not only provided important support for the steel industry, but turned Belgium— by means of more than 1,500 stops, from modest boarding points to majestic station buildings—into a popular tourist destination, for both its own population and foreigners. As early as 1843, historian Alphonse Wauters produced a Carte pittoresque des chemins de fer de la Belgique, which both provided proof of the density of the network compared to the railways of other European countries and showed the many stations, cities, villages, churches, bridges, tunnels, theaters, hospitals, schools, gardens, castles, and factories that were all so easily accessible by train.

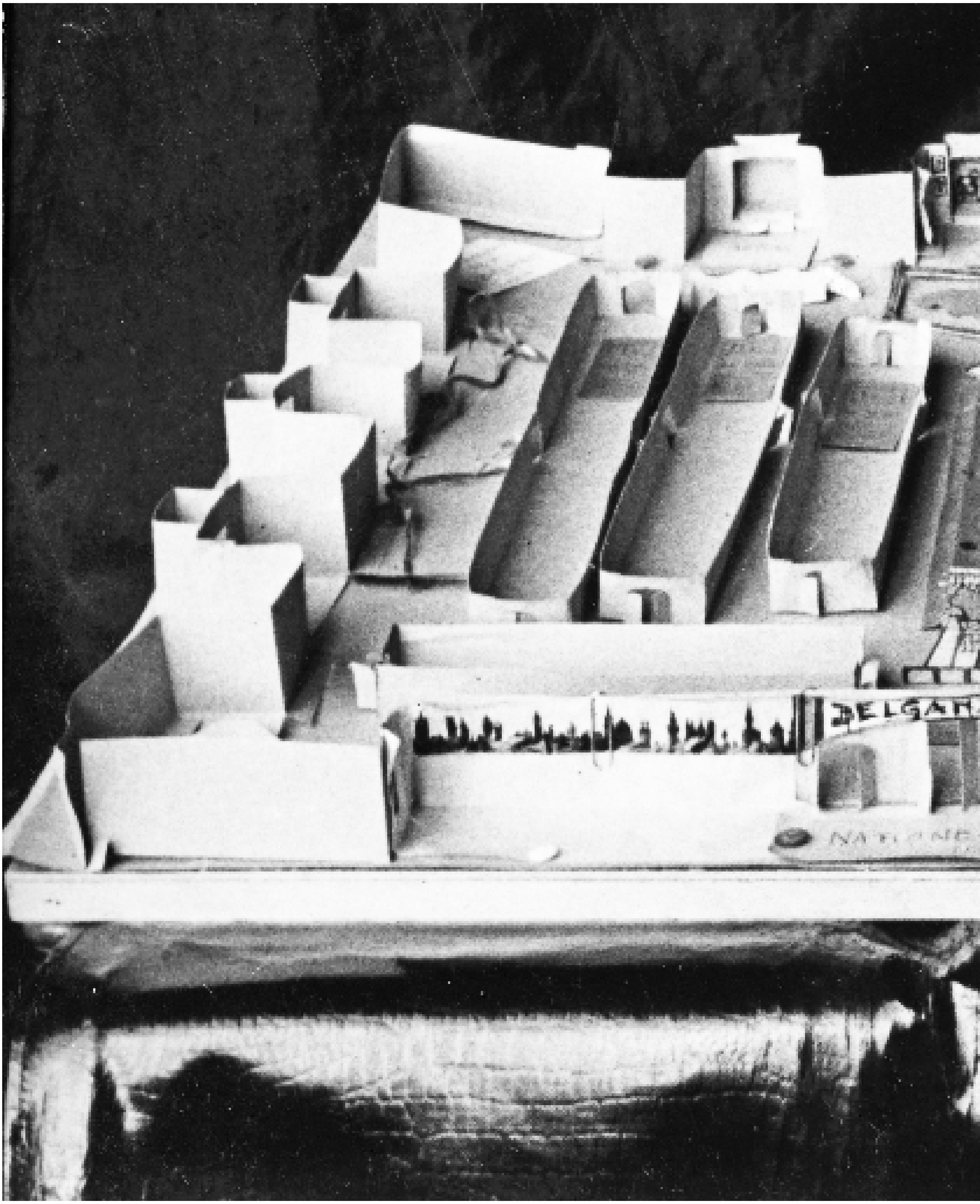
Spreading the population and its activities evenly over all the available land made it possible to avoid concentrations of dissatisfied, critical, and possibly revolutionary workers in cities— another lesson from Great Britain. Thanks to the small size of the country, practically the entire labor market became accessible to everyone. It is, in the end, the main reason for Belgium’s paradoxical urbanization: the density of the country increased incrementally, but just about everywhere, and not concentrated in cities. Three laws from the second half of the nineteenth century have guided or driven this process, which went hand in hand with a galloping industrialization.[7] In 1869, a law on workers’ subscriptions offered advantageous rates on home- to- work journeys: as far as commuting was concerned, it was affordable to work in the city while continuing to live in the countryside; the more journeys you made, the less you had to pay. The second law dates from 1885 and allocated more money for the rollout, on a regional level, of the rail network, which remained completely in the hands of the government. And, finally, the third law, from 1889, facilitated the means to become owner of a house with a small plot of land, thanks to cheap loans, limited taxes, and competitive construction companies. With some exaggeration, it’s safe to say that Belgium was distributed equally among all its citizens; the territory of a nation whose existence was mainly commanded by other nations was divided into almost as many plots as inhabitants— a feeding the multitude of biblical proportions that has lasted for almost two centuries, because there is always yet another piece of land to be found on which a house can be put.

From the very beginning, commuting— and thus traffic— has been essential to make this miracle work. Socialist politician Emile Vandervelde— nicknamed “the boss”— lectured a student organization in Paris in 1899 about this remarkable situation, which did not exist in France or Great Britain: “Around Brussels, for example . . . all the hills are covered with little white houses, most often inhabited by urban workers. Instead of settling in the city, they go to work there every day, but keep their dormitory in the countryside and— thanks to the social exploitation of the railways— pay lower rents, live in a healthier environment, and provide for additional resources by cultivating a piece of land or a vegetable garden.”[8] Vandervelde recognized the advantages of this territorial dissemination, but he ended his speech, nevertheless, with a plea for the city as the only possible locus for change and for more equity: “It is in the cities that ideas are elaborated, that revolutionary forces are concentrated, that the technical transformations which will create the new world are prepared.”[9] The absence of classic big cities, in favor of what can be considered as a garden city on a national scale, was also noticed and studied abroad. British sociologist and industrialist Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree wrote Land and Labour: Lessons from Belgium (1910), in which he looked for strategies to tackle the problem of poverty in his own country: “In Britain we are confronted with the rush to the towns which has been so striking and ominous a feature of our national life during the last half century. All are agreed as to the physical deterioration resulting from the migration of country people to overcrowded urban areas, and yet the drift continues. Belgian experience can help us to prevent it *and shows that the land question lies at the root of the problem."10 The combination of individual ownership, based on a bourgeois-liberal model, outside of cities, with a very dense and cheap public transportation system and widely distributed industrial and agricultural activities, kept the population quite poor but also quite satisfied, or at least unable to nurture or express discontent. This was acknowledged by Rowntree, whose sociological research method consisted of walking from house to house. He found that the spatial organization of their country made most Belgians work hard for little money, and it would be no more than reasonable if "the people became more intelligent, more sober, more independent, and conscious of a deeper meaning in life."11*

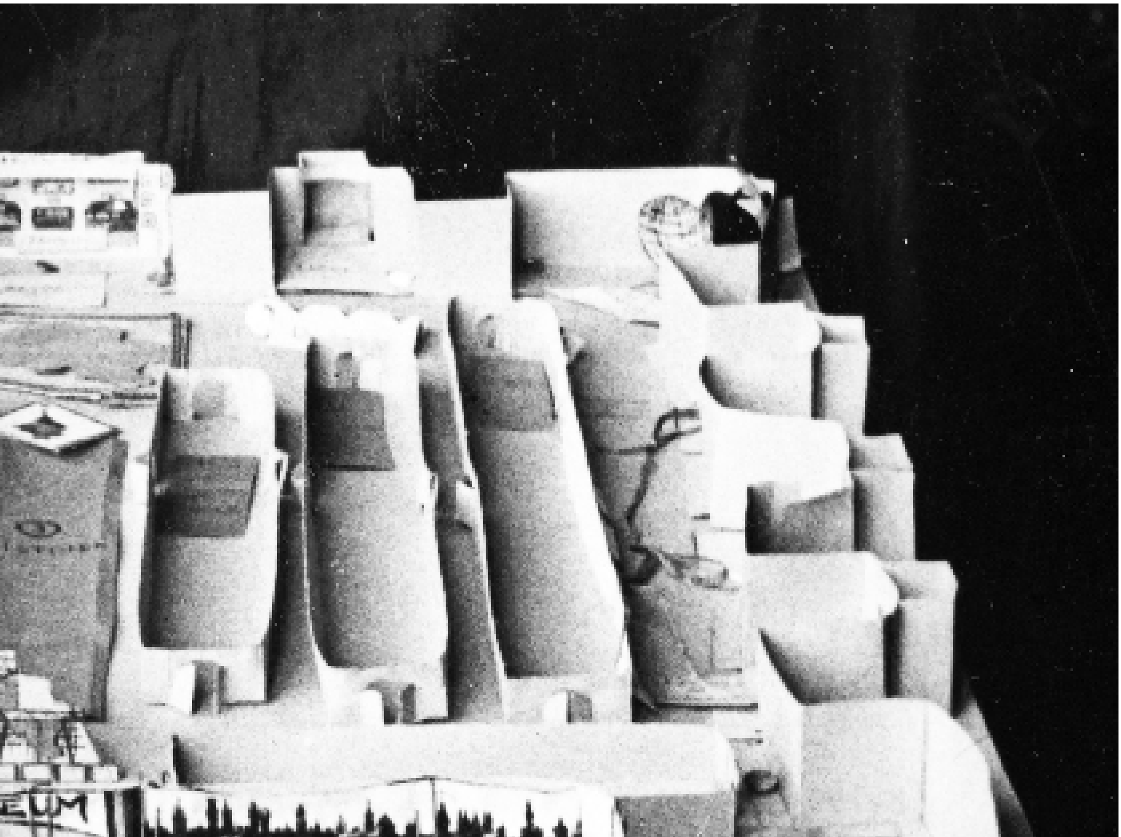
The territorial problem of Belgium, along with its many far-reaching consequences, was laid out at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it has remained more or less unaltered—the only thing that changed was the denseness and the near totality of it all. In 1967, British critic Ian Nairn spoke of the "splendid and full-blooded chaos" of Belgium, and— extending that bodily metaphor—it's true that with the railroads (and later the highways and streets) as a vascular system, architecture metastasized all over the Belgian body.12 To diagnose its diseases and abnormalities, to conceive of a cure, to grant amnesty to what cannot be helped, or to accept its difficult but always present invitation to intervene, to plan, to design, to draw, and to project— it became both a dream and a nightmare for architects, urban planners, and theorists. Whoever was able to "manage" or to "arrange" this kind of national chaos would be able to take on the rest of the world. Such an internationalist or cosmopolitan zest has always been—and continues to be— part of Belgium's raison d'être, but it blossomed before and particularly after the First World War.13

Its best known and most tireless exponent was Paul Otlet, a lawyer, bibliographer, and peace activist, whose father, a politician and entrepreneur, had made his fortune in the European tramway industry, and had thus been partly responsible for the way Belgium got filled up. It was Otlet's Borgesian dream not to know everything there is to know, but rather to order that knowledge, and to make it universally accessible.14 In this way, so was his conviction, humanity would be able to truly profit from everything it has achieved so far, in a process that would ultimately lead to the solution of all problems and conflicts. Remarkably, Otlet wanted to reach his goals not only by means of lists and catalogs, but also by imagining places and spaces— exhibitions, museums, archives, lecture rooms, congress halls, international institutions, universities, and entire cities. The world itself was not enough; everything important that it contains— and everything it pertains to— had to be gathered, in a human, comprehensible way. Such an undertaking could best be carried out on three different scales: the city, the nation, and the world, corresponding with three institutions of knowledge: the Urbaneum, the Belganeum, and the Mundaneum.

Otlet frequently invited architects to translate his ideas into projects. In 1929, for example, Le Corbusier designed a Mundaneum, as a complement, but also as a correction, to the future headquarters of the League of Nations, the first worldwide organization with a mission to maintain world peace. There was talk of realizing this building in Belgium, but it was deemed wiser to opt for neutral Switzerland, which had suffered much less during the First World War. In 1927, Le Corbusier had lost the competition for this Palace of Nations in Geneva— or rather, the jury, chaired by Victor Horta, could not reach a conclusion, and a monumental, neoclassical compromise, fabricated by a group of Beaux-Arts architects, was built instead. The impossibility of choosing modernist architecture for such an important institution caused indignation, and it was one of the major factors leading to the founding in 1928 of CIAM, the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne. One year later, Le Corbusier seized Otlet's ideas to settle the score, while the Belgian accumulator was eagerly looking for a prestigious occasion to relaunch and reorganize his objects and documents— piled up since 1910, and growing to terrifying proportions, in a side wing of the Cinquantenaire Arcade in Brussels— as an international knowledge-for-peace center. An important part of Le Corbusier's project for a Mundaneum or a World City in Geneva would be the so-called World Museum, a pyramidal stepped temple tower, completely empty inside, allowing for the free disposition of exhibition panels, and organized by means of a continuously spiraling circulation, narrating the evolution of humanity like a marble rolling down slowly. It would have been an otherworldly, mythical, fabulous palace, in other words, and not even such a far-fetched architectural expression for "an illusion, a vain wish, a utopia; a music of the future about which the only certainty is that if it does happen, it will happen differently than Otlet and Le Corbusier have imagined," to use the dismissive words of Karel Teige.[15] Although some American



Paul Otlet, Belganeum, 1937, model.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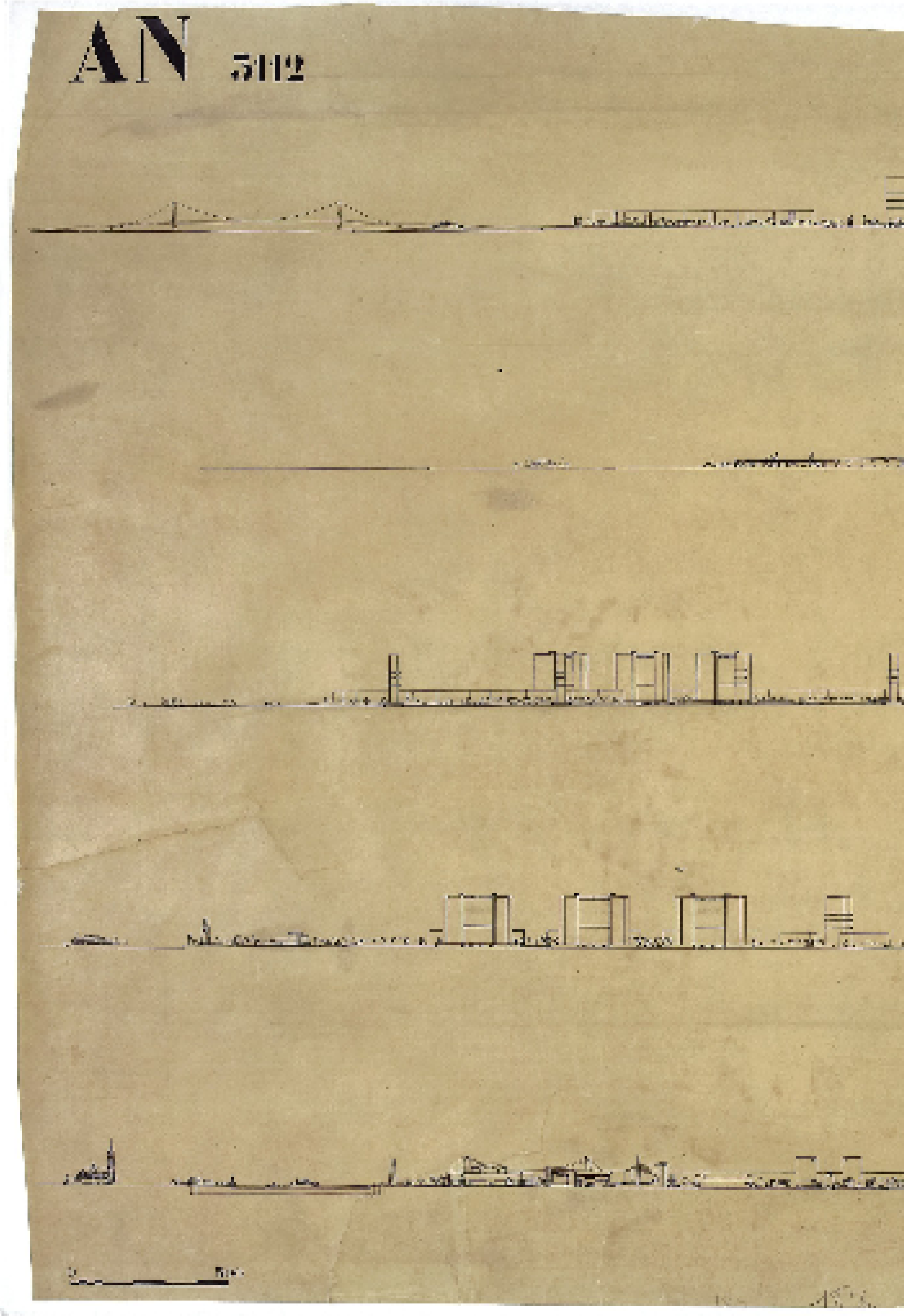
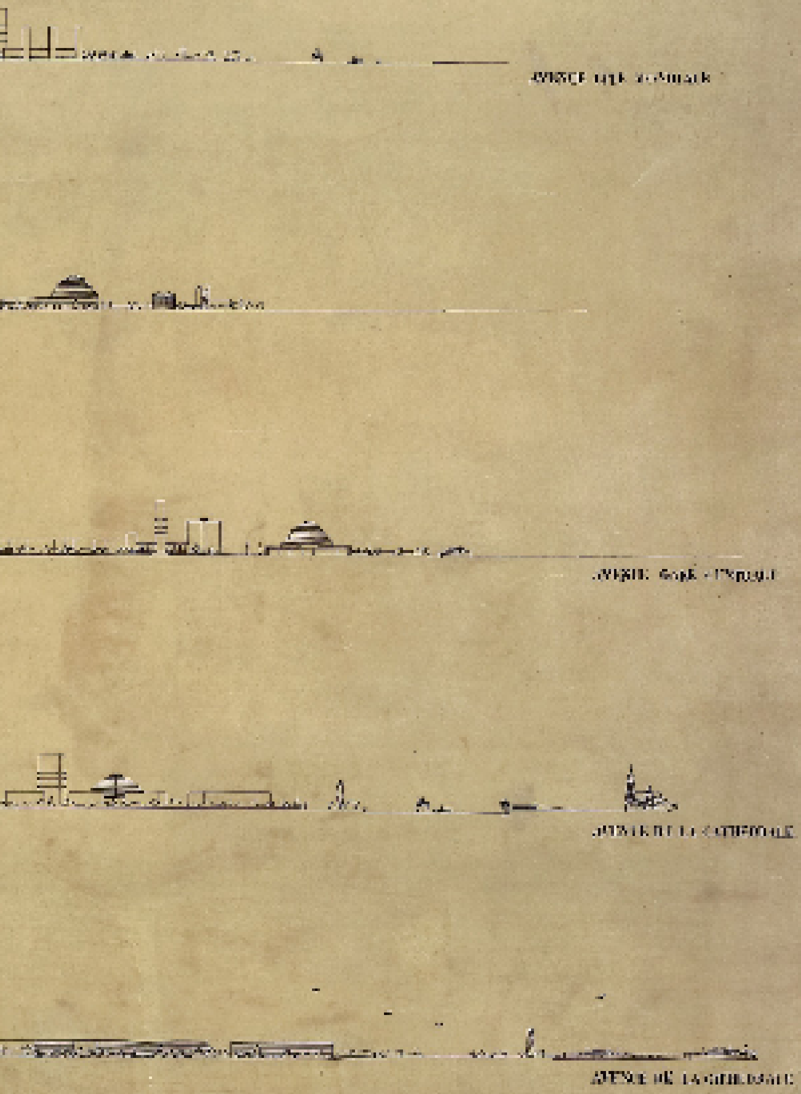


Le Corbusier, Urbanisme de la rive gauche de l’Escaut, Anvers, 1933. Fondation Le Corbusier/ ProLitteris, Zurich, 2022.


AVENUE GARE CENTRALE
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millionaires were prepared to finance the Mundaneum on Swiss soil, the bourgeoisie of Geneva didn't like the prospect at all, and the League of Nations was also very skeptical, in a world order that was once more becoming increasingly nationalist.

In 1931, Otlet was able to convince Belgian modernist and CIAM member Victor Bourgeois to come up with a project for a Cité Mondiale in a suburb of Brussels, incorporating the Royal Museum for Central Africa. The Mundaneum, in this case, was schematically designed as a kind of cycling track, crossed by two perpendicular axes. In Brussels, Bourgeois anticipated an Urbaneum, a study center for the urban planning of Belgium, to be located near the Royal Museum. In a monograph on Bourgeois's work from 1952, abstract painter Pierre- Louis Flouquet foresaw positive consequences for Belgium's spatial chaos: "This type of Urbaneum would have the form of a Wagnerian theater, that is to say, a quadrilateral whose three rectilinear sides constitute large- glazed walls through which the panorama of the region emerges, while the fourth side is blind and groups maps and graphs, above small working cells. Below in the center is a model of the agglomeration kept up to date. The aim is to interest all citizens in the development of the city and in town planning. The setting is worthy of uniting precision, ease, and refinement. Order and clarity to stimulate enthusiasm!"16 One year later, it was Le Corbusier's turn again to conceive as a piece of architecture what would much later become reality, but much more unfathomably so, in the World Wide Web. On October 6, 1932, Otlet sent a telegram to Le Corbusier: "exCeLLenT OPPOrTUnITY. UrGenT. wOrLD CITY AnTwerP. COMe sATUrDAY." He had to wait three days for an answer: "sOrrY. IMPOssIbLe TO COMe. wITh FrIenDshIP. COrbUsIer."17 Otlet had gotten wind of a competition for the urbanization of the Left Bank of Antwerp, and in 1933 Le Corbusier did make a project: a combination of his much larger Ville Radieuse with Otlet's World City, which would be located close to the historical city of Antwerp, on the other side of the river. The jury of this competition concluded that none of the submitted projects could be realized with the available resources.

Is it a coincidence that Otlet's fantasies about epistemological order were developed in Belgium? The increasingly variegated appearance of the country irked him too. In 1935— at the onset of the final decade of his life, when world peace had again disappeared from the horizon— he published Plan Belgique. The seven-part subtitle of this 170page booklet goes like this: Essay of a General

Economic, Social, Cultural Plan. National Urbanization Plan. Connection to the Worldwide Plan. Conditions. Problems. Solutions. Reforms. State planning was not exceptional at the time: in 1933, Belgian Socialist Hendrik de Man—the uncle of the notorious deconstructionist Paul—had presented the Labour Plan to combat the economic situation after the Great Depression. Despite or because of its ambitions, Otlet's Plan Belgique does not contain any drawing or sketch, if such a thing—as an imagination of vague concepts—were possible. His attention to one nation, and not to the entire world, might be an indication of creeping doubts about internationalism. The Belgian state's expulsion of his Mundaneum in 1934 from the Cinquantenaire Arcade would also have been taken by him as an indication that his homeland was in dire need of reorganizing and restructuring. Following the debacle of the competition for the Left Bank of Antwerp, Otlet had written in 1934 his answer to the question of what had happened to urban planning:

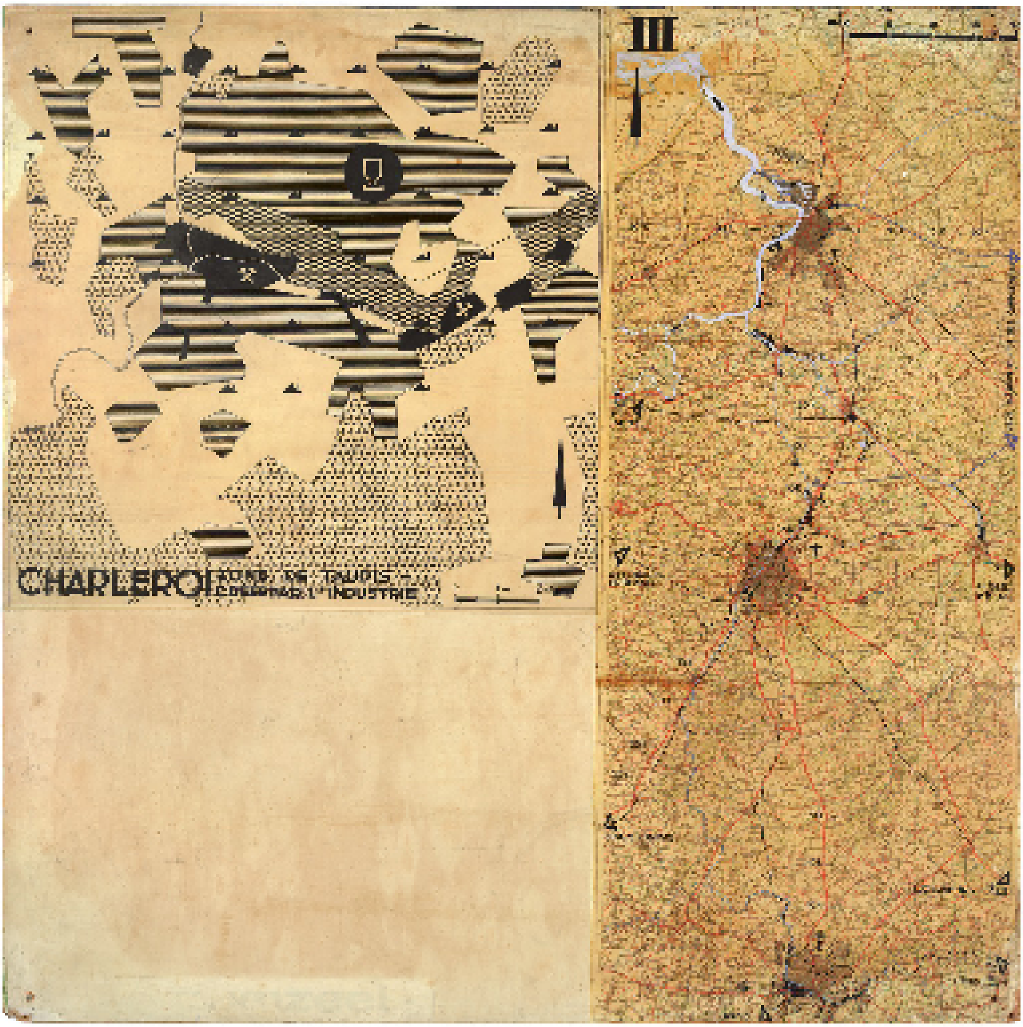
> For a long time, urbanism was a matter of the street, a square, a district before becoming an urban agglomeration as a whole. Later, the conception of urbanization was generalized to the region. For small countries such as Belgium, national urbanism is a reality; the development of the entire territory of the nation conceived according to a single group of principles. . . . For such countries, one senses the necessity of international urbanism, because the population distributions and relations beyond the borders are established in such a manner that extensions, connections become necessary.[18]

The desire for total urbanization is what gives Plan Belgique its panache. It's an enticing and not even that farfetched vision: isn't Belgium a country that—because of its compact size, its flatness, its availability—seems capable of being filled and designed in its entirety? Nevertheless, many passages in Otlet's 1935 Plan self-implode in unintentionally comic, bureaucratic, Wittgensteinian culs-de-sac: "The Plan is a coordination of efforts prefigured on the basis of the results to be obtained and the means of obtaining them. Consequently, the Plan is an instrument of ideas, an expression of science applied to the aims of practical life."[19] Only on the pages about Belgium's territorial organization do Otlet's words become real, and alternatingly frightening or promising *because of the technocratic efficacy they deem possible, aimed at creating, or reinforcing, one national economic totality: "The hour has come to submit to full scrutiny everything that can be called, with a broad and new name, the Urbanization of Belgium. One would have said formerly, in more limited terms, the tooling of the Nation. Urbanization must give substance to ideas, and translate them into physical instruments, and give the structure of organs to life."20 The country Otlet aimed for is a modern country that works— it functions smoothly like an oiled machine, with all its parts and components completely interlocking, but its entire population is also active, productive, and on the move. He proposed to organize passenger transport for free, because it is "the traffic of merchandises that would pay the expenses that would find their compensation in a renewed life." A little encouragement was no taboo: "One could consider the obligation to move, to change air, to see the country, to emigrate."21 The paradoxical outcome of this total urbanization— involving roughly everything that exists in a constant activity and connection (something that, again, later became reality thanks to the internet)— would be the redundancy of the city, as a reservoir (a Corbusian idea, of course) of what is too old and slow to participate in the national industriousness: "Achieve a regular depreciation of cities. One day, maybe, one should think of concentrating, thanks to technology, in an old neighborhood everything that belongs to the past, and of modernizing systematically all the other parts."22 It shows how Otlet's plan for Belgium was not driven by an aesthetic longing for formal order, but rather by the desire to expand and to optimize what was already there, to be able to organize and predict people's doings, as well as the purpose of their pursuits.*

To "treat the entire territory of Belgium as one large agglomeration, because of its population and the number of its municipalities; as a large garden sprinkled with inhabited centers in which one lives, works, takes a walk; as a great city sitting by the sea"— it was not the monopoly of Otlet.23 As the guardian of what should have been the penultimate knowledge center, and as a possible enlightened and entrepreneurial client, he was very much up to date when it came to urban planning, while his influence in architectural circles was not negligible either. The Plan Belgique can be considered as a radicalized manifesto but equally as a retroactive one, in words only, of what the Belgian delegation of architects proposed at the fourth CIAM congress in August 1933, which took place on board the cruise ship ss Patris II, sailing from Marseille to Athens, with some Greeks islands as a stopover.24 Although the city had always been a prime concern for most members of CIAM, in 1933 the aim was to address the wider scale of the “Functional City.” Eighteen national groups were invited to supply analyses of, and projects for, cities within their own territories. Not much later, Le Corbusier, as well as historians of the immediate present of CIAM such as Sigfried Giedion, argued that this fourth conference led to the drafting of the Athens Charter, the battle plan for the modernist approach to city development published in 1943. In reality, there was much more discussion and dissension about the heavy-handedness and straightforward determination with which the city was to be tackled, especially regarding the existing urban fabric.25 The Belgian contribution to CIAM 4 addressed another, even more prickly and prescient issue: was it still appropriate and topical to talk about cities? Although not a single official Belgian member of CIAM took part in the voyage from Marseille to Athens, a report was presented on board the Patris II.26 The guidelines for all the contributions, stipulated by Cornelis Van Eesteren through his three model maps of Amsterdam, were only partly obeyed. Maps of Brussels and Charleroi that had been produced in the office of Victor Bourgeois did show, as requested, the existing infrastructure on a scale of 1:10,000, as well as the sociological nature of the different districts, with the dominance of the working class. The more fascinating document, however, and a kind of bug in the city- centered CIAM system, was a survey map of 1:100,000, showing Antwerp, Brussels, and Charleroi, and thus a large part of Belgium.

Black lines indicated the railway connections between these agglomerations, surrounded by concentric circles. Victor Bourgeois elucidated the drawings as follows:

> In Belgium, the study of cities no longer has any significance from the point of view of urbanism: it has to be replaced by the study of diverse economic regions. One should not forget, really, that Belgium is, proportional to its size and population, the most industrialized country in the world. . . . Doesn’t, despite of the crisis, the Belgo- Luxemburgian union produce as much iron and steel as the large countries? . . . Belgium presents itself, therefore, as an extraordinary amalgam of industries, ports, waterways, railways, and agglomerations, with one natural reserve: the Ardennes.27


III
CHARLEROI
ZONE DE TAUDIS –
ENGENDRÉ PAR L'INDUSTRIE

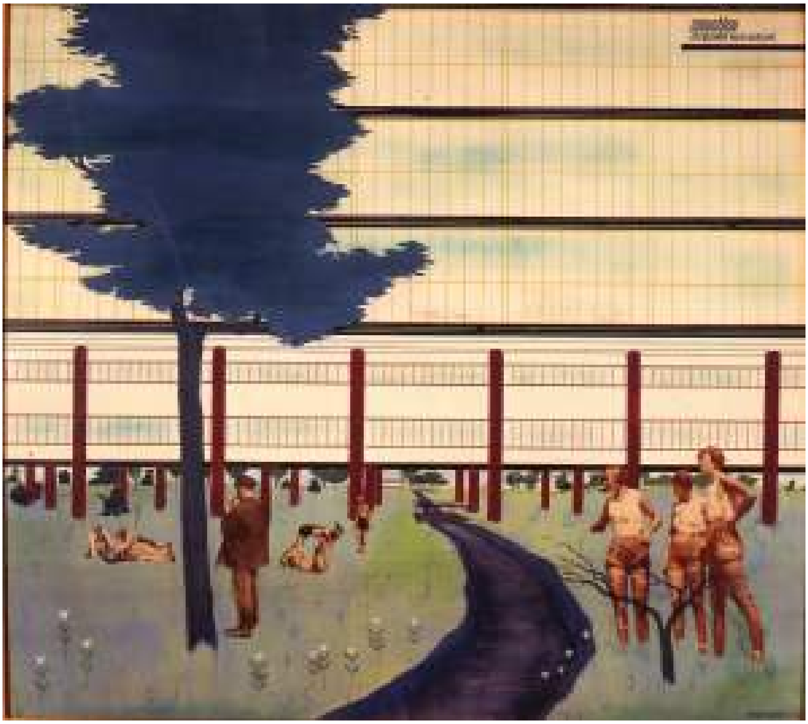
Victor Bourgeois, Antwerp- Brussels- Charlerloi, CIAM 4, 1933. Archives gta, eTh Zurich.

The definition, within this amalgam, of the “economic axis” of Antwerp, Brussels, and Charleroi—their names beginning, in that order, with the first three letters of the alphabet, as if they could be at the start of a new language— also hinted at the possibility of considering Belgium as a linear city. That notion too had been floating around, migrating between different countries, and it became quite popular in Belgium during the 1930s.28 Since it was developed in 1882 by Spanish city planner Arturo Soria y Mata, it had been proposed and used mainly as an infrastructural alternative to the classic, concentric industrial city that became too congested. In 1919, another Spanish architect, Don Hilarión González del Castillo, presented plans and drawings for a linear city in Belgium at an exhibition in Brussels devoted to postwar reconstruction, accompanied by this introduction: “If my project contributes to colonize your devastated fields and to create a model Belgian city, I would find myself well rewarded for my work and I would consider paid the debt that I contracted toward you— oh beautiful Belgium!—for the moments of pleasure and for the precious knowledge that I have gathered in my travels to this glorious and blessed land where people worship these great ideals which are called: Justice, Freedom, and Work.”29 As a mixture of Soria y Mata’s ideas and Ebenezer Howard’s concept of the Garden City, the project, landed on Belgian soil, made no secret of its bourgeois and suburban aspirations. The only truly axial elements that remained were the trolley line, accompanied by shaded walking paths in between trees. The ideal that both Soria and González del Castillo concurred on was straightforward, and it would have sounded familiar in Belgium: “To every family a house, and to every house a garden.”30

In its northern iteration, the concept of the linear city revealed another internal contradiction: proliferating on an axis that was previously called into being to connect historical cities, it would remain submissive to, and dependent on, those classical agglomerations, like a spine dreaming of the explosion of the head it both needs and supports. This system error, together with an intercontinental ambition, was already present in 1882, in one sentence by Soria y Mata himself: “A single street of 500 metres’ width and of the length that may be necessary— such will be the city of the future, whose extremities could be Cadiz and St. Petersburg, or Peking and Brussels.”31 This contextual difficulty, as well as the accompanying suspicion that the mechanistic linear city could *never become truly metropolitan, can explain why Belgian architects who toyed with the idea often opted to make an abstraction of the country, and even of the world, they were working in. The World City, for example, designed between 1928 and 1931 by Julien Schillemans, and clearly inspired by Russian constructivism, was projected onto a vast nature reserve that was, already at the beginning of the twentieth century, impossible to find in the region in which the architect worked. In 1935, at the Fourteenth International Housing and Town Planning Congress in London, Renaat Soetewey presented a talk with the title "The Positive Layout in Belgium"— a mainly economic analysis that had a lot in common with Otlet's Plan Belgique from the same year but was influenced by what was happening at the time in the Soviet Union: the industrialization under Stalin, the onset of the Stakhanovite movement (of workers supposedly taking pride in producing much more than required), and the translation of those directives in projects for linear factory towns, of which N. A. Miliutin's plan for Traktorstoi along the Volga from 1930 was the most well- known.32 The diagram Soetewey drew to show how regions that industrialize could also be urbanized was taken almost literally from Miliutin: the same residential, industrial, and green strips; similar highways, railways, and ship routes. The only thing that wasn't adopted was the Palace of the Soviets.*

One option to make the linear city contextual and more real was to organize it along a canal as an elongated, straight, continuous—and uncontested— stripe in the landscape. In 1921, in Zelzate, a municipality close to Ghent, construction started on a garden city with the noteworthy name of Small Russia, because two Russian engineers oversaw the construction site. Commissioned by an association of the municipality and factory owners, it contained 171 individual houses, as well as a boarding house with rooms for 31 bachelors. Conceived by architect Huib Hoste and urban planner Louis Van der Swaelmen as the start of a linear city, it was also intended as the first phase of a possible industrial development along the canal leading from Ghent to Terneuzen in the Netherlands.33

The notion of the linear city was developed furthest, and in a sense most realistically, in a graduation project by Renaat Braem from 1934. This design by an equally precocious and ambitious twenty- four- year- old immediately attracted attention, as an attempt, in the words of one critic, "at the realization of a better



Renaat Braem. Lijnstad, 1934. CIVA, Brussels.

future in a better world with perhaps another humanity to be wished for."[34] Just like Victor Bourgeois, Braem took the city of Antwerp, where he was born, as his starting point, but instead of drawing a line to Brussels and Charleroi, he chose Liège as an endpoint. Direct inspiration came, on the one hand, once again from Russian attempts at increasing production and liberating dwelling and, on the other hand, from the Albert Canal, named for King Albert I, and dug by hand between 1930 and 1939, as a connection of almost 130 kilometers, not only of Antwerp and Liège, but also of the Meuse and Scheldt rivers. Braem's linear city consists of a strip of a hundred kilometers with six parallel zones for transport, industry, cars, parks, agriculture, and housing, in long, reflective slabs, under which the green grass extends far into the distance.

One of the contradictions of the project is that it also contains monumental, expressively singular buildings for collective use, such as an "absolute theater," a youth hostel, and a crematorium. When Braem showed his linear city, including that "City of the Dead," to Le Corbusier in 1935, he was met with a growl and a sneer: "How can a young man occupy himself with death?"[35] The young architect nevertheless spent two years in the studio of Le Corbusier, who appropriated his Belgian linear city in 1936 by publishing it in L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui as "an application of the theses of the Ville Radieuse." Le Corbusier added, in a comment that also shows the outcome of the 1933 competition for Antwerp had not yet been digested, "See here . . . how the flat, sea- wind- swept moors of the banks of the Scheldt are expressed with talent and exploited with all the lyricism that we would like to see introduced in the work of city councilors, so they can bring us something else than dead or inhuman towns."[36] Until his final years, Braem remained faithful to the conviction that the world, and Belgium in particular, should be able to be redesigned completely. In 1964, this time influenced by the megastructure movement, he proposed the concept of the "band city" to develop an integral vision on the spatial planning of Belgium: "If one can mobilize the energy and the materials for a trip to the moon and for the expansion of space dominated by man to the entire solar system, it must also be possible to order our planet a little bit."[37] "The city," he wrote in 1981, beneath a drawing in which a Brasília-like environment spawns from a cranium that sucks up and transforms a dense landscape that resembles Belgium, "is changed by those who don't like it, or no longer like it."[38]

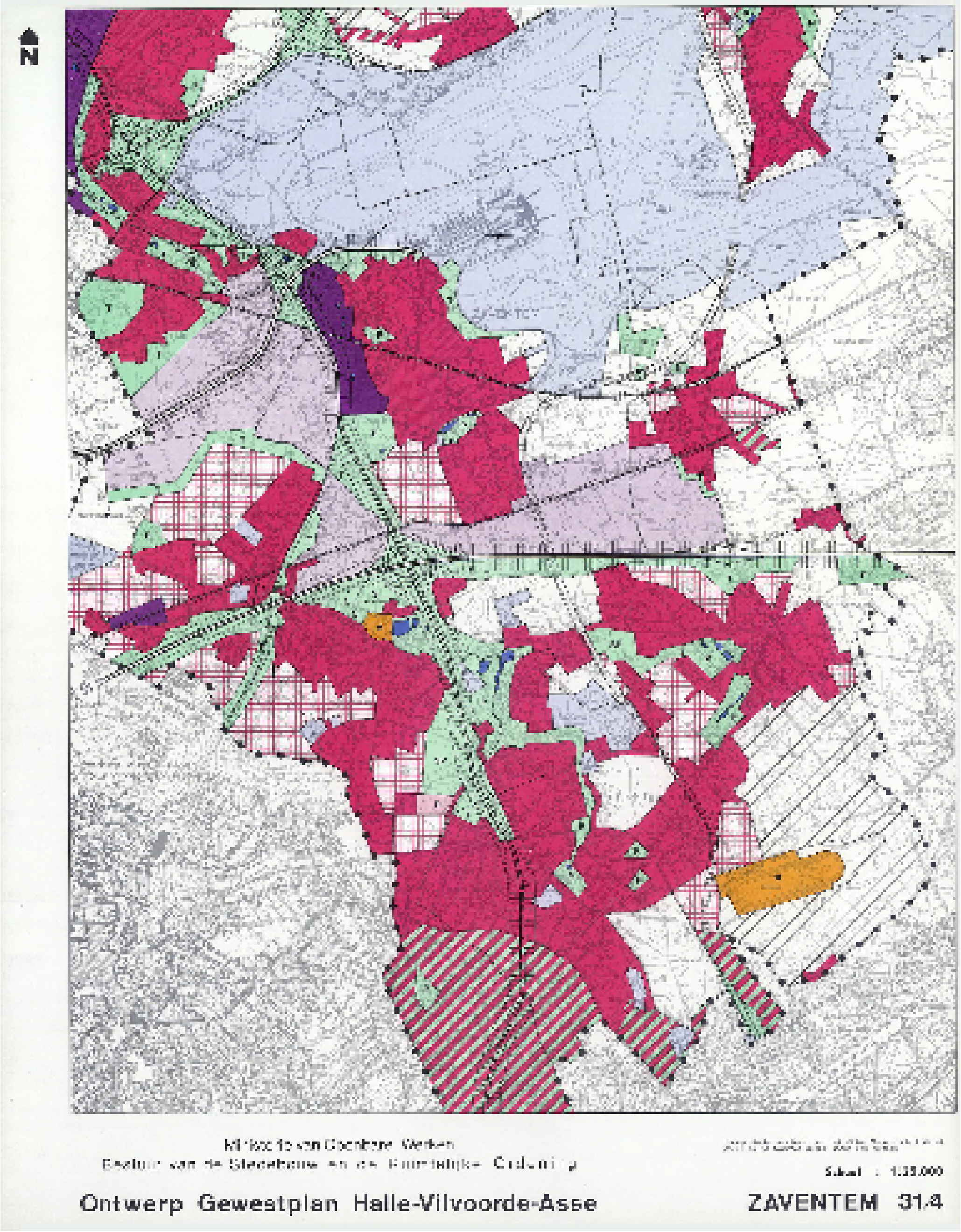
Despite their naivety and grandiloquence, these quotations typify a generation of architects and intellectuals, and testify to what was deemed possible, in the interwar period, for the organization of the territory, and thus of society and life. The First World War reinforced the conviction, prepared during the long and enlightened nineteenth century, that prosperity and peace could and should be achieved in a different and more rational way; the Second World War destroyed that belief, not least because it was partly the result of the same desire for control, planning, and order. With a cynical exaggeration, it's possible to say that, in the decades following the rupture of 1945, there was only one plan left—and implemented vigorously— in and for Belgium: the Marshall Plan. With this European Recovery Program, the United States tied European countries to itself, creating a buffer with the communist Soviet Union.39 Although the exact influence of all the American money on European postwar economies, societies, and their architectural and territorial development remains unclear— he who pays the piper calls the tune (or in the Belgian, Catholic and Burgundian version of this proverb: whose bread one eats, whose word one speaks). The tendency to individualism and lack of planning that was present ever since the conception of Belgium in 1830 was reinforced after the Second World War, as if it would be cruel to deny a population plagued by five years of war and occupation what it seemed destined for, and what it really, really wanted: individual freedom, formalized by a house of one's own, in a further urbanizing territory, too small to densify or to consume completely, but too large to be experienced as a city. In 1946, one year before Secretary of State George C. Marshall launched the idea that would bear his name, the American Academy of Political and Social Science published a thematic issue of its journal, entitled "Belgium in Transition." As a "cross section of Europe," the country could prove to be a worthwhile object of study for the American reader, although deep moments of recognition were not excluded: "In many respects," the editorial stated, "the Belgian and the American are alike. Both are hard- working, alert to the day, eager to learn, negligent of meaningless formality, devoted to liberty and the individual's right to make his own way."40 In one article on the topic of "Housing and Reconstruction," Belgian regionalist architect Adolphe Puissant mirrored that cliché by emphasizing that "in general, the Belgian loves the familiar house with its private garden. Zoning," he continued, "will determine the areas for the different kinds of houses, which are to be equipped with every element necessary for the physical and cultural comfort of the inhabitants.”41

That both did and didn’t happen: an incalculable number of seemingly comfortable houses were built, but only with a very limited conception of zoning. The three laws from the second half of the nineteenth century— from 1869, 1885, and 1889, facilitating commuting, the rail network, and ownership— were succeeded and reinforced during the postwar years by another legislative trilogy. In 1948, to meet the pressing housing shortage, Christian Democrat Alfred De Taeye issued a law to encourage and enable families to build their own house in the disappearing countryside. As a reaction, in 1949, Socialist politician Fernand Brunfaut issued another law, this time to finance social housing by the government—an initiative that was much less influential, because individual ownership remained key, as well as settlement outside of cities. And in 1962, the urban and spatial planning law was issued, with these opening articles: “The spatial planning of the country, regions, departments, and municipalities is established in plans. This organization is designed from an economic, social, and aesthetic point of view, as well as with the aim of preserving the country’s natural beauty unscathed.”42 To do so, nearly every piece of land, no matter how small, got a “designation” with an accompanying code and color—red for housing, yellow for agriculture, purple for industry, orange for recreation, dark green for forest, et cetera— and a set of formal building codes, concerning, for example, the pitch of the roof, the distance from neighbors, or the use of materials. Instead of countering the cluttering of the territory, fragmentation was reinforced: agricultural lands could simply be divided up and colored differently by municipal administrations, while in other cases necessary transformations— from office area to residential zone, for example—proved to be impossible.43 The law as well as the so- called regional plans at a scale of 1:25,000 that were approved between 1976 and 1980 were used as bureaucratic instruments, but the ideology remained.

The same can be said of the Structural Plan for Flanders, commissioned more than a decade later by the Flemish government. It was presented in 1995 at a time when the division of Belgium into different political regions was already more advanced.44 By the end of the twentieth century, spatial and territorial awareness had grown, and many societal, ecological, and political *problems— pollution by agriculture and industry, traffic jams, regular flooding of areas that would better have been left empty, but also the success of extreme right political factions linked to urban decay— were often explained by pointing at the inadequate layout of Belgium and the absence of a territorial vision. Above all, the Structural Plan needed to guide the anticipated (and desired) growth, in the twenty-first century, of both the population and the economy. It was preceded by years of research and study: despite all of the paperwork done, nobody knew, in detail, how Belgium and Flanders had really evolved, and what was where. One of the concepts developed to describe and to order the spatial chaos was the idea of "deconcentrated bundling": businesses and economic facilities should be gathered in economic hubs, instead of being located just anywhere. The structuring potential of linear infrastructures and mobility was emphasized, as well as that of nature reserves— in other words, those parts of the territory that had not yet been built upon. A main goal of the Structural Plan was to preserve, as much as possible, the little open space that remained. To make that happen, the plan suggested avoiding, at all costs, further ribbon development— the uncontrolled growth of freestanding houses along access roads leading to hundreds of small linear cities.*

Many architects reacted as they had done to the Belgian situation since the Second World War: with skepticism and resignation. Johan Baele, an architect known for brutalist houses built during the 1970s, published an ironic three- part interview in the main architecture periodical, in which he spoke with one of the urban planners who had produced the Structural Plan, a building contractor, and the director of the Flemish association for architects. The planner— unworldly, good- natured, and imperturbable— seemed to believe in his magic formulas; the contractor admitted that there had been, recently, some interest in building plots of as little as 250 square meters, but he also asked Baele not to forget the fantastic qualities of lots of 1,200 square meters; and the architect regretted the total absence of his colleagues in decision-making processes about territorial development— contrary to what had happened during the interwar period, anything larger than one building was no longer planned by architects, but by dusty bureaucrats, accurate surveyors, shrewd entrepreneurs, and influenceable politicians.45

This situation was confirmed but also challenged when, in 2001, a group of architects decided, for the first time in more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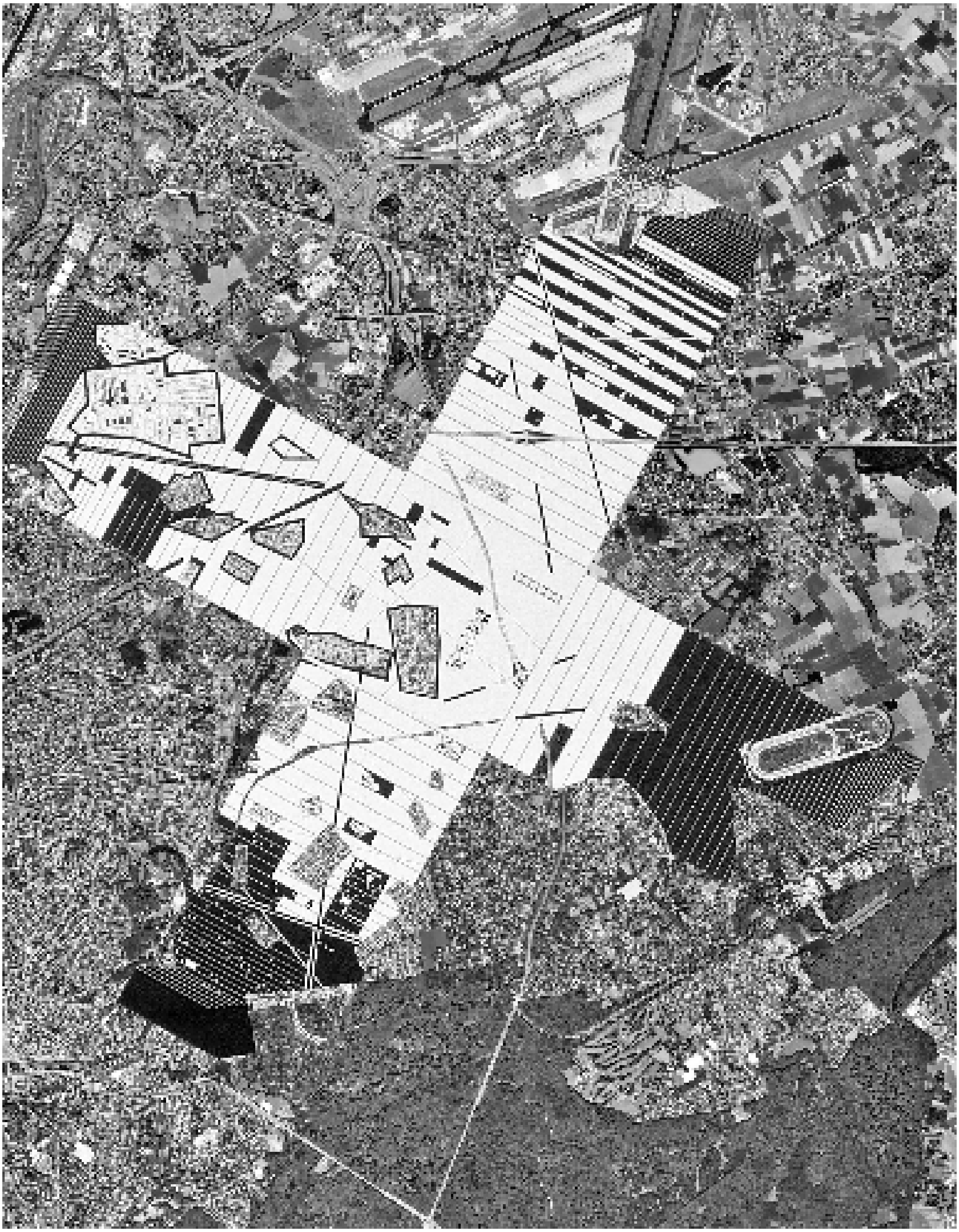
Ministerie van Openbare Werken
Bestuur van de Stedebouw en de Ruimtelijke Ordening
Schaal : 1:25.000
Ontwerp Gewestplan Halle-Vilvoorde-Asse
ZAVENTEM 31.4

Staatssecretariaat voor streekeconomie, Gewestplan Halle-Vilvoorde- Asse, Zaventem, 1977.
Ghent University Library.



Xaveer De Geyter Architects, After- Sprawl: Found, 2001, collage.

than sixty years, to tackle the splendid and full-blooded chaos of Belgium as a whole. The team of Xaveer De Geyter Architects created both a book and an exhibition called After-Sprawl as an architectonic reaction to the Structural Plan. First and foremost, it was a formal project: once the disappearance of the distinction between urban and nonurban, or between city and periphery, has been established and accepted, what can architects do? The letter combination this time was not AbC, but bAG (the project's working title): Brussels, Antwerp, and Ghent, as a triangle defined by the three cities, could serve as a model for other highly urbanized regions in Western Europe, such as the Ruhrgebiet in Germany, the city triangle of Basel-Zurich-Bern in Switzerland, the Randstad in the Netherlands, the Veneto in Italy, or London in the United Kingdom. The first strategic decision was to focus on "'negative space': the space that is not normally consciously designed or planned . . . in the form of green zones, parks, gardens, sports grounds, agriculture, roadside verges and so on."[46] To work with the opposite of architecture—empty space—had also been the conceptual backbone of OMA/Rem Koolhaas's plan, with De Geyter as project architect, for the city of Melun-Sénart near Paris in 1987, which in turn was influenced by the project for Berlin as a Green Archipelago from 1977, led by O. M. Ungers.[47] After-Sprawl, therefore, was the opposite of a plan for development: its aim was not to further urbanize and consume the territory, but to frame, formalize, and qualify those existing terrains that could be safeguarded as public enclaves, almost squashed in between infrastructure and private space. To do so, nine operations were defined, nine activities as infinitives: shift, overlay, insert, hide, frame, found, connect, array, and add. "Hide," for example, meant to camouflage villas and other buildings with hedges, to turn them from independent entities into components of the landscape; "insert" implied the projection of the Parc de Versailles to structure and connect small and isolated negative spaces; while "shift" meant to move a copy of the existing grid of roads to open up and unlock the green spaces hidden behind ribbon developments.

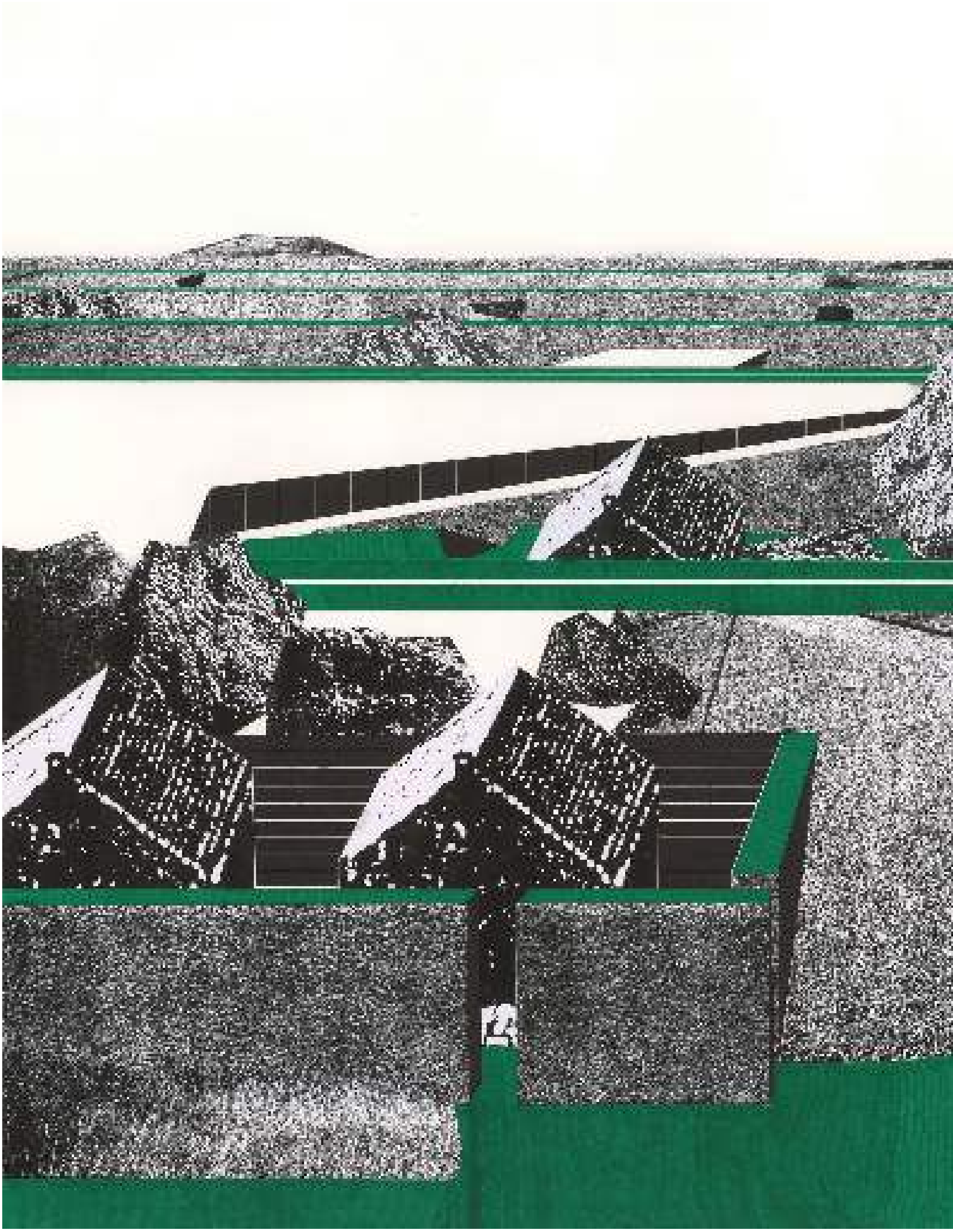
The reactions to After-Sprawl bordered on the violently negative. The source of contention was precisely the ambition of these architects to intervene in what was considered too complex and advanced to tackle. "With permission, just how naive can people be in this world of ours, particularly when they are dealing with the phenomenon of urban sprawl?" asked one indignant critic.[48]

An urban planner called After-Sprawl "a dead end," as a project that "completely ignores a social and political reality, where space is a scarce commodity and where power relations play a role."49 A reaction was written by Pier Vittorio Aureli, who worked in the office of Xaveer De Geyter between 2000 and 2002 and collaborated on After-Sprawl, making most of the collages. He defended the project as "a trend-breaker":

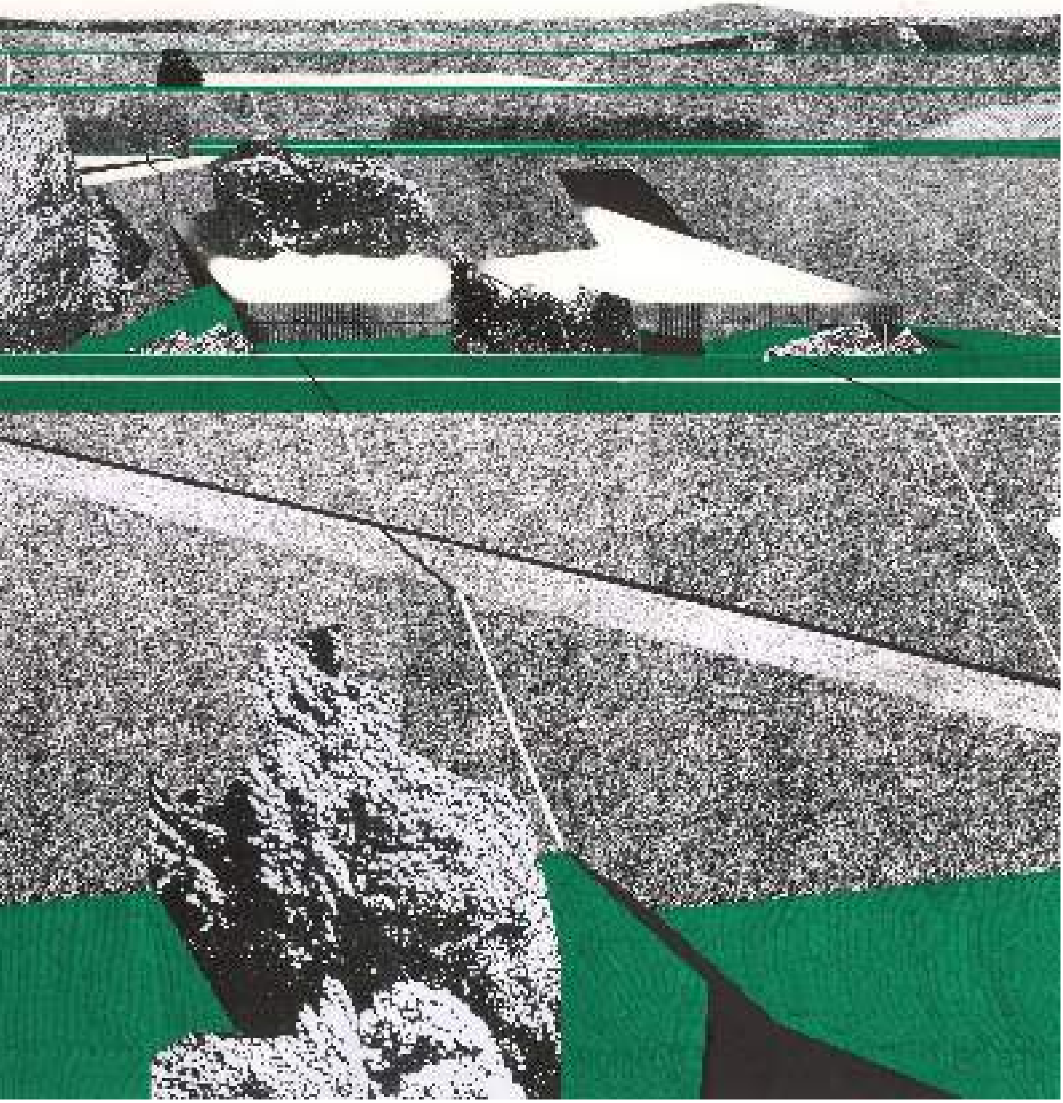
> *Before immersing himself in the complexity and contradictions of the world . . . , before defying the decision-making processes of a few bureaucrats and before creating social utopias or political manifestos and thus being premature, it is necessary that the architect, in all modesty, concentrates himself a bit on the resources he has at his disposal to realize a project. In other words, he has to think about the language with which he communicates with the world. That language, architecture, is inexorably abstract and therefore does not correspond to the figurative translation of content, but at the same time, through its form, it is able to offer an important cultural response to reality.50*

With all that, the hope expressed by architects of the interwar period that they could order chaos and change the world had not been restored. Yet After-Sprawl showed how architecture, as a form of thought rather than as the art of building, can make it possible to look differently, and to at least imagine a divergent course of things— which may well have been its only sensible function since the beginning.

The leverage of this project for Belgian architecture was rather small, although that didn't prevent architects from continuing, also in more recent years, to think about the larger scale, and— more specifically for Belgium— about that nationwide accumulation of houses. Dogma, the office that Pier Vittorio Aureli founded in 2002 with Martino Tattara, continued the tradition of making projects that can be seen as sequels to, or spinoffs of, After-Sprawl, fundamentally so because they do not arise out of a paralysis by "reality as found." Park City from 2016 is, for example, based on the biggest and the second biggest architectural taboo in Belgian sprawl: destruction and collectivization. As part of a planning strategy for a suburban area in Limburg, in the eastern part of Belgium, the partial demolition of existing houses is proposed,



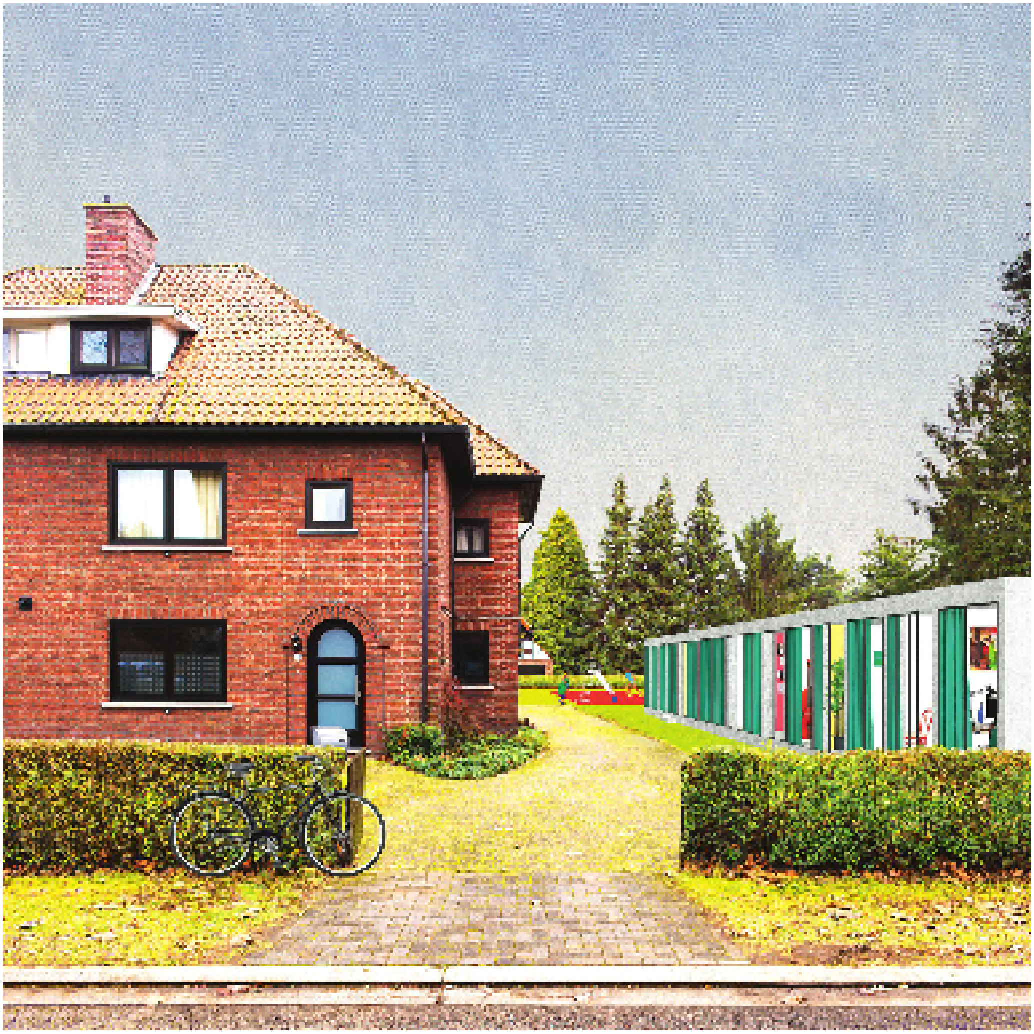
Xaveer De Geyter Architects, After- Sprawl: Hide, 2001, collage.



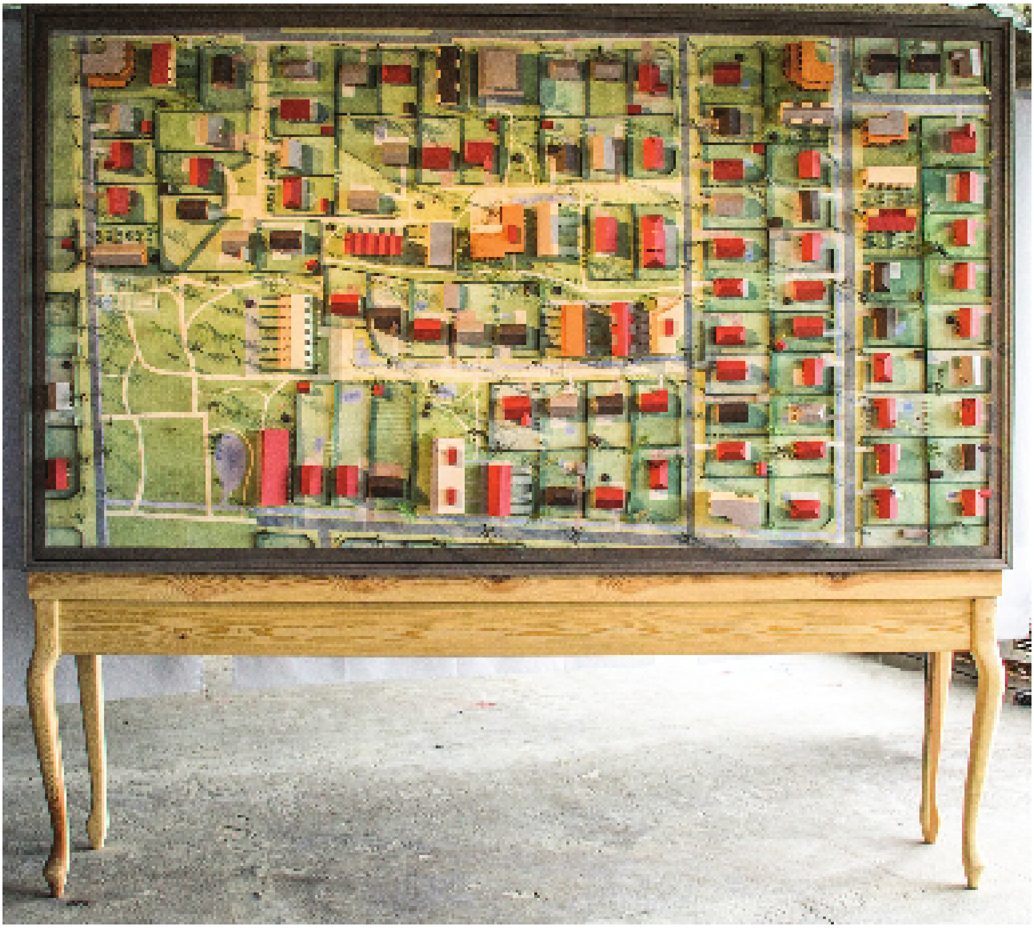
“to shrink the footprint of built space and to enhance open land for agricultural use.”51 In this way, and paradoxically perhaps, a suburban area with outdated, oversized houses and a shrinking population can become ~~in~~ a more concentrated version, based on more collective forms of ownership, and supplemented with public facilities such as green areas, tramways, bikeways, and pedestrian paths— a new linear city located along the Meuse river.

Similar, but less resolute and comprehensive, is what Bovenbouw proposed in 2018 for Wondelgem, a suburban neighborhood northwest of Ghent’s city center, with a current density of ten houses per hectare.52 The intention is to sketch out an evolution that should eventually accommodate thirty to sixty houses per hectare. On corners or on larger plots, older houses can be replaced by collective homes— park villas— for several families. In a later phase, collective gardens, streets with more bikes and fewer cars, and more public spaces can create a parklike living environment with a much higher density. Presented on an upright model, just like Luc Deleu’s Manifesto to the Order from almost forty years earlier, it respects the Belgian desire for brick houses, but it also tries to introduce variation, and at least a certain logic.

The question can be raised whether these projects, whether they represent shrinking or growing, tearing down or building, aren’t ultimately part of the same rearguard fight. Could it be that it is better to give up on the Belgian territory? Or differently (and maybe worse): isn’t it about time that Belgium recognized its fate (and its history), and finally, and entirely, fills itself with buildings? Such a more pragmatic— or defeatist— way to understand sprawl was put forward in 2011, when the editorial team of the journal San Rocco published its second issue, entitled “The Even Covering of the Field,” a formulation for a world which is indeed completely filled with architecture: “the field stretches over a large surface, a kind of thin, dirty encrustation of the planet.”53 The connection with Belgium was made one year later by Pier Paolo Tamburelli and Andrea Zanderigo, writing about the method of OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen: “Their work precisely corresponds to their native landscape: the mediocre, confused, and domestic sprawl of contemporary Flanders, here understood as one of the many episodes of a similar global condition, an even covered field, more or less coinciding with the entire planet. The rarefied rooms repeatedly designed by OFFICe cannot be thought to be outside of this field. . . . The rooms extract power from the



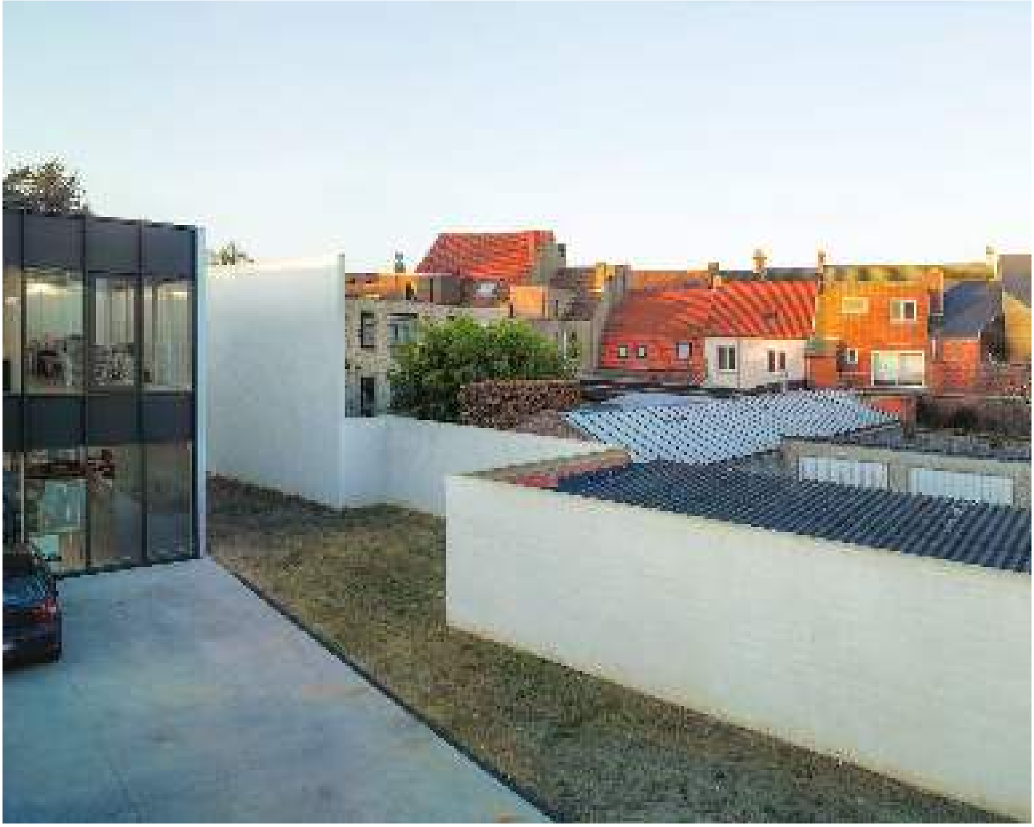
Dogma, Park City, 2016, collage.



Bovenbouw, Wondelgem: Collective Housing in a Collective Landscape, 2019.

dirt around them; they burn into void the raw energy accumulated in the dirt."54 It is true that the dialectic between order and disorder is central to the work of OFFICe, and connects them to Belgium, as one of the most densely built regions in the world. Many of their projects are a precise, formal reaction to the disarray they found at the start. Without this context, from which all coherence seems to have vanished, the classicism of their architecture might seem inappropriate or haughty; it is only the stormy sea of building that never stops flowing, that enables difference and distinction. Attempts at containing the chaos are abandoned, and instead compositional ways are sought to create exceptions. The most obvious example is the shop OFFICe built in 2009 in a municipality in West Flanders, on a site in the form of an irregular polygon that appears to be the outcome of many successive subdivisions.55 Together with offices and a small apartment, it is housed in two identical blocks, with a square in between them that is the same size as the two blocks added together. It is the clash with the irregular garden walls of the surrounding houses, as the border with the even covered field, that gives this project an allegorical dimension, indicating both the power and the impotence of architecture, reduced as it is, as activity, to cutting out figures, shapes, and patterns, on a small scale.

And this strategy can, once more, be relativized too. Whether they deal with collectivization, densification, or an overall compositional theory, these projects can lead to a nagging suspicion: Do they just treat symptoms, rather than trying to diagnose and combat the disease? If the Belgian territory has become what it is, since the nineteenth century, because of its extremely intricate railway network, isn't it obvious to turn to those tracks again? Whether they are gone, hidden, or still in use, the railways and their many stations have made Belgium, so it is only thanks to them that the country could be remade. Why shouldn't architects turn to the phenomenon that uncorked the territory almost two hundred years ago by making it accessible? Unfortunately, the marriage between architecture and Belgian railway companies has yet to be blessed, aside from a few very impressive buildings. As a black spot in the national architectural policy, almost everything concerning public transport continues to be designed by bureaucrats or by designers appointed for life. It also does not help that railways remain severely undersubsidized in a country where most voters cling to their car.

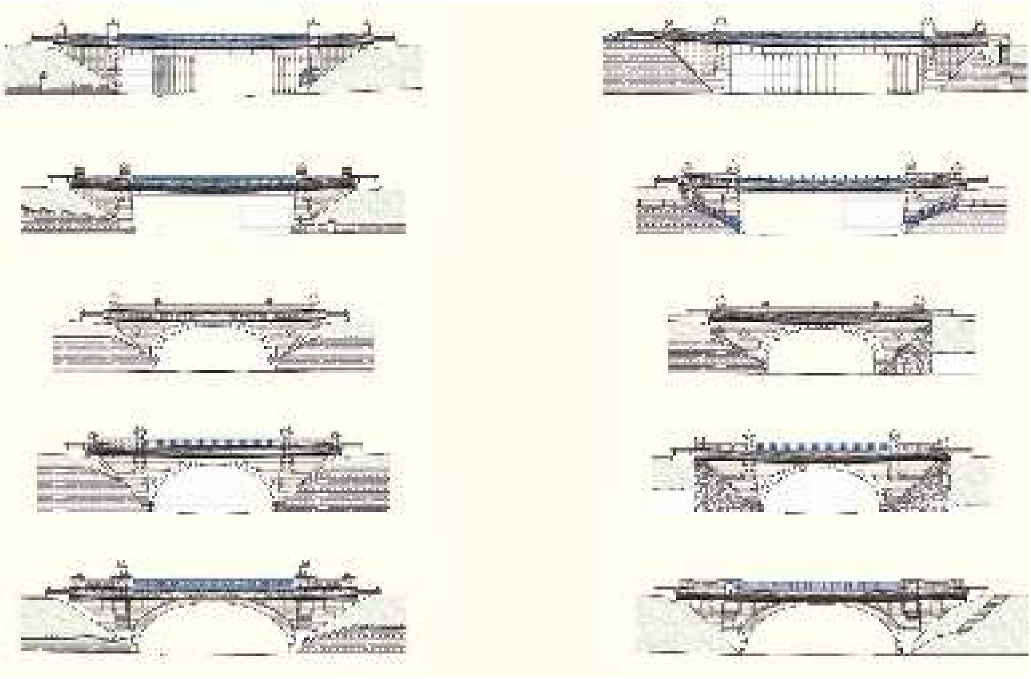


OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen, Computer Shop, Tielt, 2009. Photograph by Bas Princen.

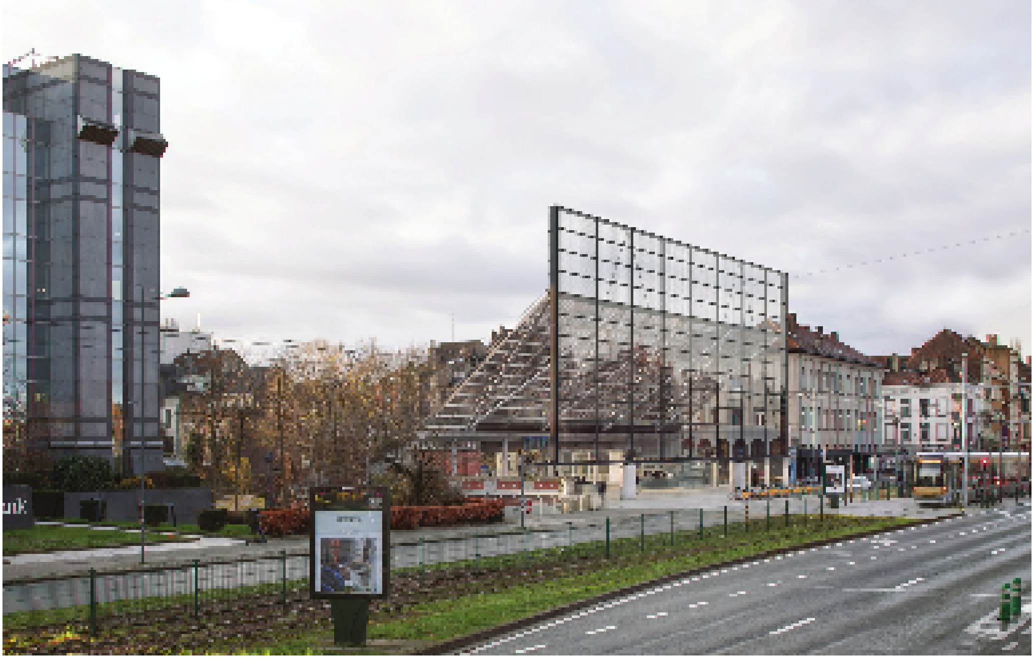
Yet something might be changing, and opportunities do arise, on different levels of scale. What it can come down to, for example, is making the railways visible, by caring for them and giving them the decorum and the decoration they deserve. In 2014, the office of Henk De Smet and Paul Vermeulen was asked to design service walkways for the tracks leading to the main station of Ghent. That station was built in 1913 by Louis Cloquet, who also provided five railway underpasses in the embankment, functioning as city gates. In the project by De Smet Vermeulen, "identical coffers form slightly different funicular curves, with spans ranging from 25 to 32 meters."56 Similar to garlands, these ten bridges hang in front of the stones and bricks of the old infrastructure, as if for a party celebrating the renaissance of the Belgian railway.

Before that resurgence can happen, many train stations are, of course, due for replacement or renovation. In 2020, the Brussels Bouwmeester organized a competition for the station of Etterbeek, very close to the University of Brussels, and one of the most scenic and urban places in the capital: the tracks are sunk in a valley, flanked on both sides by building blocks, and crowned with a busy ring road at the top. In the project by Baukunst, a glass screen, supported by a pitched roof, ensures the visibility and presence of the station along the motorway, while a platform a little further along the tracks provides an additional entrance for travelers. Glass and steel represent the reintroduction of technology into the streetscape, updating a means of transport almost two hundred years old for a new era marked by reflections, apparent transparencies, and the temporality of images.

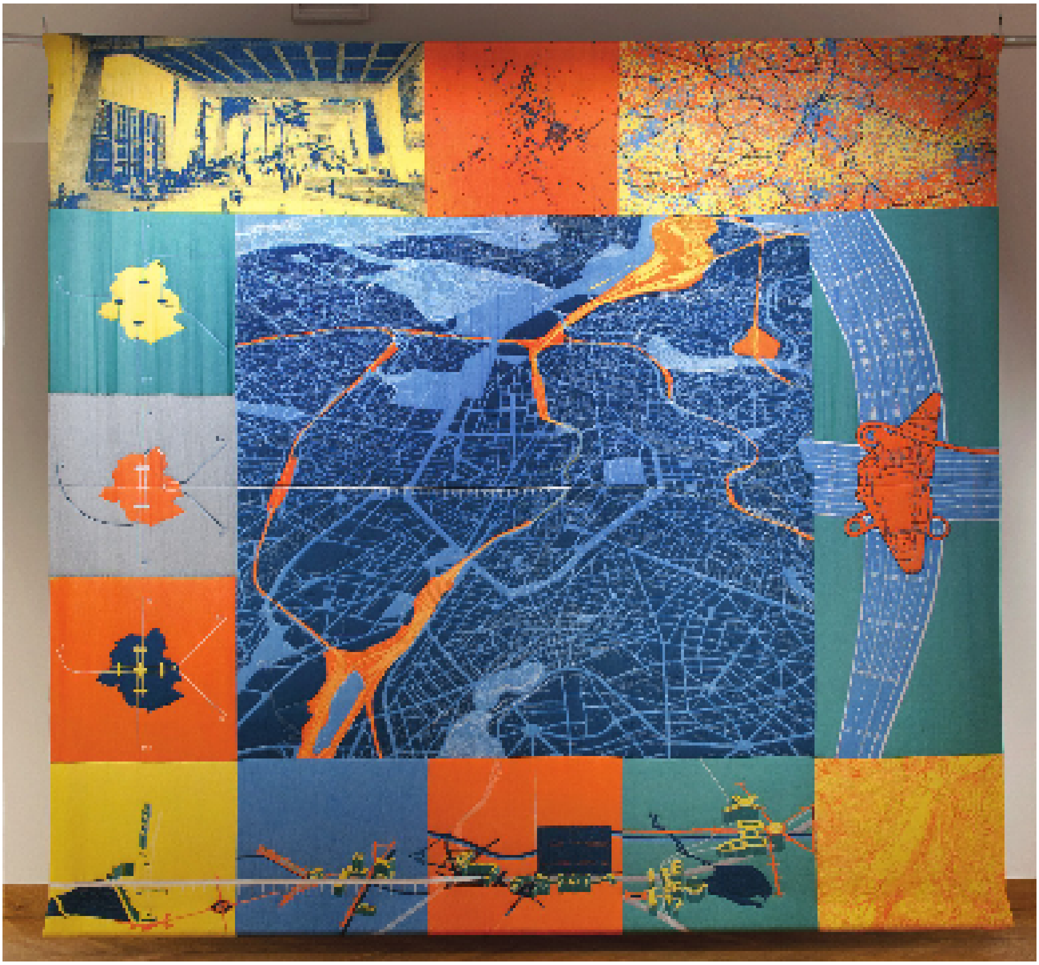
And why not just reinvent the train network too? The main artery of the Belgian (and, one could argue, the European) railways is the so-called Jonction, a connection between Brussels-North and Brussels-South, with Brussels-Central in the middle, and two other intermediate stations along the route. With 1,200 trains and 320,000 passengers a day, it has been called the busiest railway tunnel in the world, subdivided into three tubes.57 Its total length is 3,547 meters, and its width varies from 35 to 60 meters. It is a luxury that most cities lack— in Paris, for example, to change stations (from Gare du Nord to Gare de Lyon), a Metro ride is required. The first idea for such a line in Brussels dates from the 1860s, but the north-south connection came into service as late as 1952. Since then, it has become increasingly saturated, and one problem in the tunnel can quickly disrupt the entire national network. In 2012,



De Smet Vermeulen Architecten, Ten Service Bridges, Ghent, 2016.



Baukunst, Etterbeek Station, Brussels, 2020. Collage by Maxime Delvaux and Olivier Campagne.



Xaveer De Geyter Architects, Jonction, Brussels, 2012. Photograph by Philippe De Gobert.

four architectural offices were asked to reflect on that problem, and the results were exhibited in the form of colorful woven wall hangings. While most of the offices limited themselves to a careful study and a "mapping" of the present condition, the team led by Xaveer De Geyter came up with a clear proposal: extend the north-south connection by means of a perpendicular, but equally large east- west link, driving under the eastern part of the city in a tunnel, and over the lower- lying city in the western part in the form of a viaduct. These new tracks could ensure connections with Antwerp and Charleroi, while the old Jonction could lay a line between Ghent and Liège. The proposal by De Geyter and his collaborators picks up the thread of a forgotten national project from the nineteenth century, interrupted by that silly relationship with the car during the twentieth century, restoring the train as the only sensible means of transport, and finally unlocking, connecting, and making accessible the fragmented, diffuse, and built- up territory. "Chaos" is just another word for unfinished business.

6 Pull Out a Chair

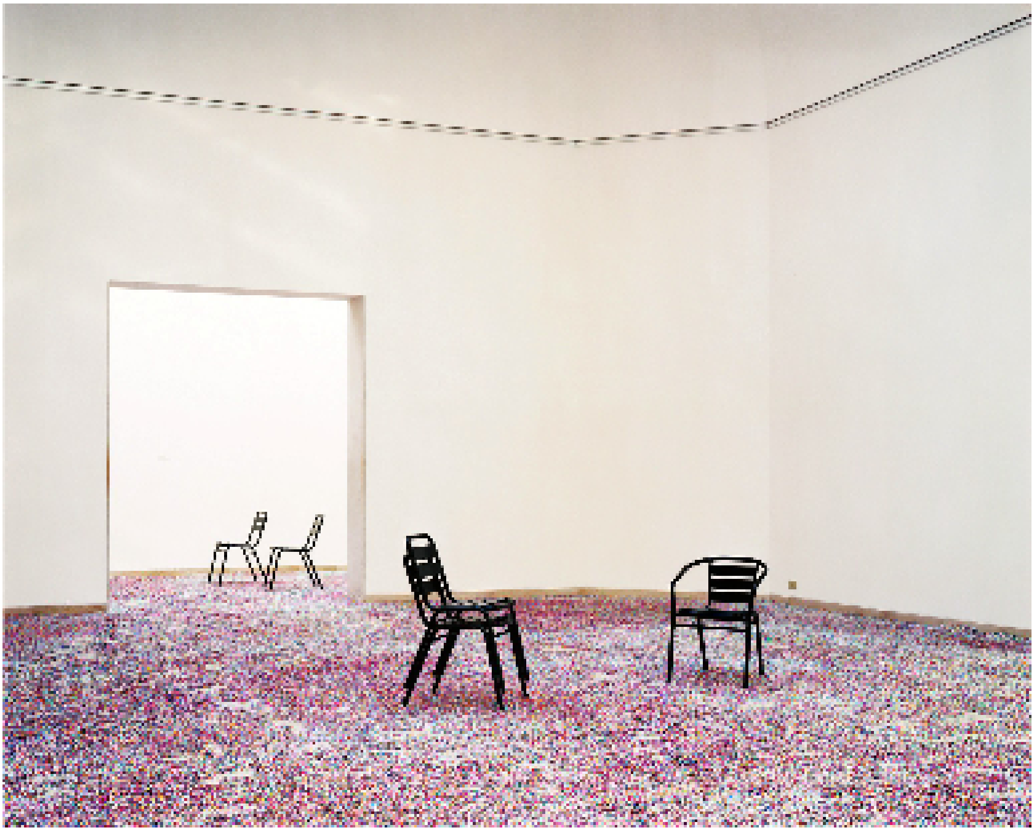
Confetti became a real and officially recognized architectural element in 2008. The English word is adopted from the Italian confectionery of the same name: at weddings, baptisms, or graduations, it is a tradition to distribute (or throw) these almonds with a hard sugar coating; the Italian word for paper confetti, however, is coriandoli, referring to the coriander seeds originally contained in this sweet.

In the early 1980s, confetti emerged as a metaphor in architectural discourse to describe a compositional method, used by early members of OMA, to deal with the distribution of programmatic components over an area, scattered at random after being thrown in the air, with, nevertheless, a final effect of total colonization. While a plan, or any other representational document in architecture, is traditionally drawn or made by hand, throwing confetti involves another manual gesture— first grabbing and holding the snippets, and then releasing and disseminating them, with a result that is at the same time predictable and always different. In 1981, Elia and Zoe Zenghelis, two founding partners at OMA, made a project for sixteen villas on the island of Antiparos in Greece— “an empty expanse by the beach, with just the sea and the horizon,” as one of the architects described the site.1 The houses seem to be sprinkled across the land, more or less evenly, but without a logic that could be put into words or numbers. The same reliance on chance was the basis, one year later, of OMA's entry for the competition for the Parc de la Villette in Paris, although in that project small pointlike servicing structures are spread over a multilayered grid of horizontal strips and vertical axes. And then there is, thirdly and finally, a painting by Zaha Hadid, who worked for OMA at the end of the 1970s, that was finished in 1983: Confetti Suprematist Snowstorm, part of the competition- winning (but unbuilt) project for The Peak, a leisure club in Hong Kong. On this canvas, which Zoe Zenghelis collaborated on, the square shreds of paper are still hanging in the air, fixed in that one moment when they have reached their highest point before falling, proving the spatial potential of confetti as compositional metaphor too.[2]

Of course, arranging objects in space by throwing (or imagining) confetti seems something completely different from making a proper and exemplary composition. And this is exactly the point: an architect or a painter who relies on confetti— whether it is in the air or lying motionless on the ground— to decide what should go where must be quite clueless, having seemingly exhausted all the traditional compositional methods. Similarly, including real confetti, as a material presence, within a project heralds an endpoint for architecture— or, rather, lots and lots of small circular pieces of colored paper are everything that architecture is not— aleatory, flat, chaotic, flimsy, and so light that even the faintest gust of wind can disrupt once more their so- called order (although, again, it would be impossible to describe those two different states, before and after, conclusively).

When OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen scattered confetti all over the Belgian pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2008, those different aspects were at stake, or they could at least become elements of an interpretation.

The Belgian pavilion was built in 1907, and it was the very first national (non- Italian) building in the Giardini.[3] The commission went to Léon Sneyers, a little- known Brussels art nouveau architect. Of his original project, today only the blocks of the central hall with a skylight and the entry section remain. After extensions and renovations during the twentieth century, the pavilion is now a completely enclosed interior, consisting of a large space at the center, with six smaller surrounding rooms or white cubes, all of them lit from above, and without any single window— there is only one small door on the right, leading to the Giardini, and to the neighboring Dutch pavilion. In 2008, the curator of the Belgian pavilion



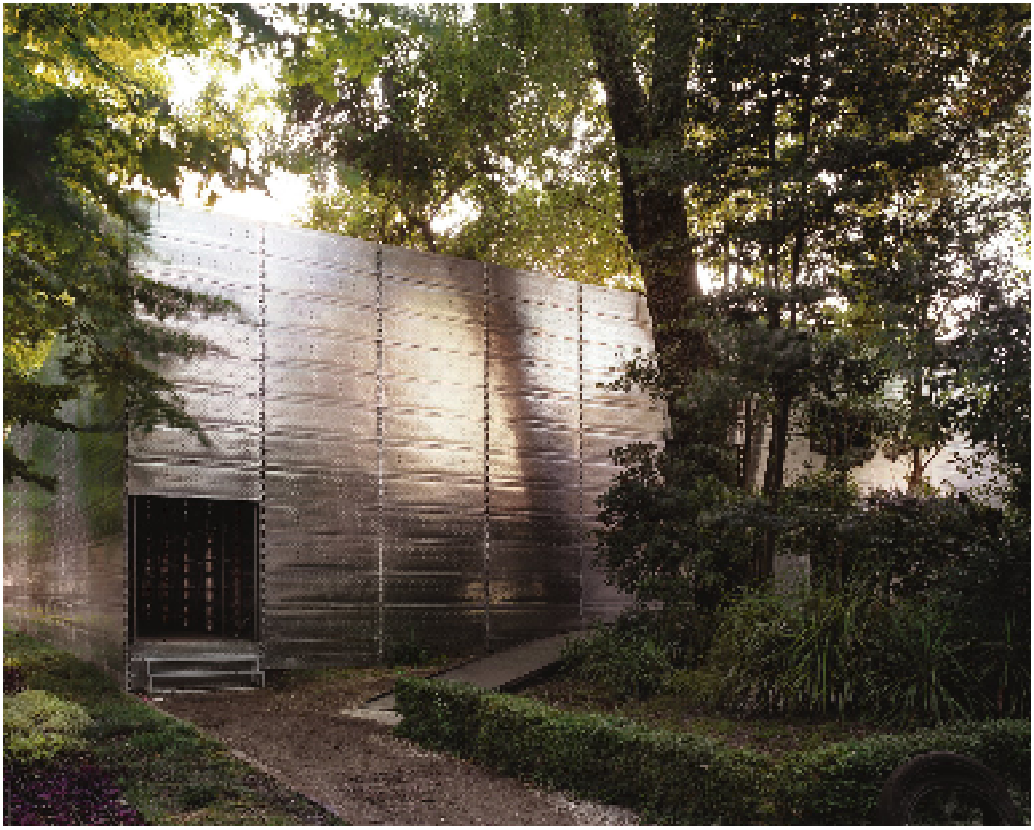
OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen, 1907 . . . After the Party, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2008. Photograph by Bas Princen.

was Moritz Küng. He had been directing a series of exhibitions in Antwerp since 2005, showing the work of thirteen young architectural offices over the course of three years. Concluding these series, he invited all these architects to participate in a competition for the Belgian contribution to the Venice Biennale with the following assignment: "Give the existing building [of the Belgian pavilion], as part of its immediate surroundings, an architectural use and function that can be experienced on a scale of 1:1 with regard to its location (a public park), status (cultural embassy), history (of the Giardini) and/or context (an international platform for architecture)."4 This brief belonged to a concept that criticized the very existence of architectural exhibitions and thus, one could argue, of architecture culture as a whole: instead of showcasing, at a biennale, architecture's many possible derivatives (such as drawings, photographs, models, texts, or movies), the aim was to show the real deal, and to offer an experience of space. The submission by OFFICe criticized this premise, in return, by following it to the letter to an almost absurd degree. Their decision to put the existing pavilion on display revealed a contradiction in the reasoning behind the brief: exhibiting an architectural facade inevitably takes place within a space, and why should another construction be necessary when the pavilion from 1907 already exists? So, from September 14 to November 23, 2008, the Belgian pavilion in Venice was surrounded by a double wall, with a height of nearly seven meters and made out of galvanized steel boards. The fence occupied the entire terrain in front, in line with the main road of the public park, but at an angle with the pavilion. The oldest building in the Giardini disappeared, hidden behind a dimly mirroring facade. The two-meter- wide corridor behind this facade, inside of the wall, was accessible from the Giardini, and led to the side entrance of the exhibition building. Visitors entered the doorway, walked about twenty meters in almost complete darkness, turned the corner, and walked another twenty meters, to find themselves inside an empty building that had been invisible all the while. The pavilion was indeed on display, but only for those who had left it, stepped into the newly created outdoor space— in between the inner wall of OFFICe's temporary intervention and the outer wall of the building from 1907— and then turned around to face the historical architecture.

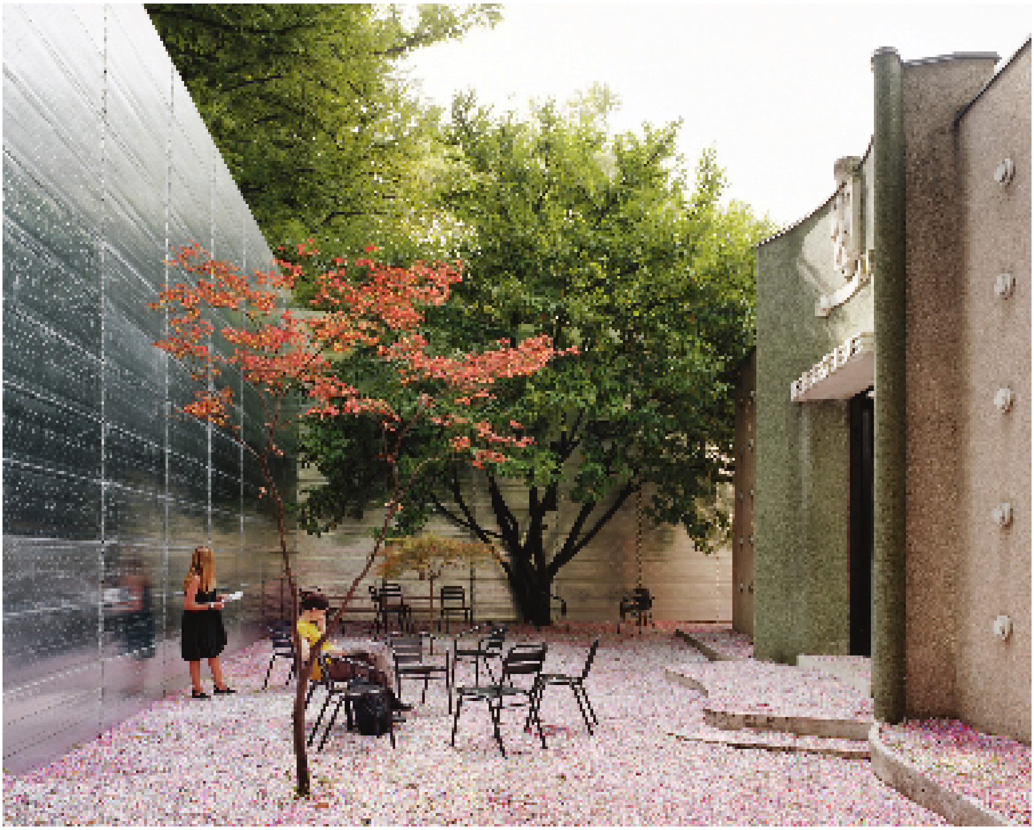
The confetti, meanwhile, was everywhere, both on the floors inside the old pavilion and on the ground of the outdoor space *in between the trees, merging both distinctive parts into a single differentiated whole. The primordial thing it represented, within the institutionally charged context of an architectural biennale, was what architecture needs but also combats, or lacks: life, in all its chaotic, varicolored, and very often vexatious but ineradicable mess. One way to truly make someone's birthday unhappy is by opening a nice big bag of confetti in his or her living room, as a present that equals a sentence to weeks of cleaning, if not to a relocation. Particularly when confronted with the almost archaic earnestness of a total, impenetrable, and aggressive wall— and of the classicist aspects of OFFICe's architecture in general— the confetti stood, indeed, for everything architecture cannot control but at the same time requires as its raison d'être and as an undermining or relativization of its power. As the biennale progressed, the shredded paper spread over the Giardini, to the other locations of the biennale, as well as to the city of Venice— and who knows where else the confetti ended up, hidden in the clothes and luggage of visitors from all over the world— making the project probably the most widely distributed contribution ever to a biennale.*

The title of OFFICe's intervention was seemingly straightforward: 1907 . . . After the Party, referring to the year in which the pavilion was built, and suggesting that a birthday bash had taken place somewhere in 2007 during its centennial— which, to be clear, hadn't been the case. What visitors saw and experienced was a set of rooms and a walled garden where people, now absent, had been throwing enormous amounts of confetti at each other. Perhaps the real occasion to party had been the final day of the carnival of Venice, which would have turned this architectural installation into an allegory for Lent, the forty- day period of fasting in the Christian liturgical calendar.

Yet in retrospect, and not necessarily in line with the intentions of the architects, other parties could have taken place here, of which the aftermath was being exhibited. On September 15, 2008, one day after the opening of the eleventh Venice Architecture Biennale, the American global financial services firm Lehman Brothers went bankrupt— the climax of the subprime mortgage crisis, prompting a general and financial worldwide malaise, and inaugurating a period— still ongoing— of economic insecurity, political austerity, institutional and democratic mistrust, overall budget cuts, growing inequality, and a pandemic of burnouts. If the Western world had been partying before, there were certainly enough



OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen, 1907 . . . After the Party, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2008. Photograph by Bas Princen.



OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen, 1907 . . . After the Party, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2008. Photograph by Bas Princen.

reasons, manifestly present, to pull the plug, to stop drinking, to silence the DJ, to turn on the lights, and to go home. Something similar can be said of the profession of architecture itself, defined (or determined) as it always is by its economic base. Now that the relative economic prosperity of the Western world was suddenly on a slippery slope, money disappeared in thin air in large numbers, taking the carefree self-evidence of architecture along with it. What was being celebrated by OFFICe in 2008 was, therefore, also a form of architecture the world was slowly parting from: obvious, detached, intellectual, conceptual, formal, dialectical, autonomous, and— most of all—not openly politically engaged.

“Cultural production is part of the world, but it doesn’t change it,” Kersten Geers said in the catalog of 1907 . . . After the Party, in an interview with Andrea Philips, who objected: “Lots of people would say that it does.” “It doesn’t mean,” Geers continued, “that we are resigning from a social and political task. It is simply not ours. Cultural production is bound to fail, in a certain sense. But that’s the important part of it. Cultural production is production without any clear goal or economic value.”[5] That kind of freedom for architecture (and for art), symbolizing the existence of a purposiveness without a purpose, to put it in Kantian terms, is only possible thanks to its exemption from political and social battles.

If there is one moment in the twentieth century when this exceptional status was proclaimed, it was in Manfredo Tafuri’s 1976 essay “The Ashes of Jefferson,” in which the Italian historian wrote about the architecture being produced at that time in the United States, a country once led by a partially enlightened president such as Thomas Jefferson. (Ashes are, after all, a more apocalyptic form of confetti— polluting, gloomy, gray, and dirty, remnants of what was incinerated because it had to go.) In the slipstream of the major economic crisis of the 1970s and writing about the “manipulations of linguistic materials” of the modern movement (“whether we are dealing with Eisenman or Venturi”), Tafuri recognized, quite bitterly, “a real event: ‘the war is over.’”[6] Architects at the end of the 1970s, he argued, resigned themselves to their limited, cultural task in society: subjected to the economic ways of the world, they realized they could no longer change much, and that’s why they decided to show that predicament—bringing about change was something others had to do, or what might become possible again in a later phase. This end of the direct engagement of architecture with politics and society—of the possibility that *architects could go to war, fight, change the world— was the beginning of a party that can be labeled as "contemporary" (instead of modern) architecture. What better reason is there, after all, to start partying than the end of a war? And what, subsequently, could better end that party than another war, or at least a major crisis? Of course, that pendulum swing between engagement and detachment, or activism and autonomy, is never absolute. If, more than thirty years after the 1970s, the party of contemporary architecture indeed came to an end in 2008, in (of all places) the Belgian pavilion in Venice, this would not mean, unfortunately, that architects suddenly regained the power to change the world. What it would mean is that most of them would no longer grant themselves the privilege and the duty to stay out of that battle. The circumstances had become too bad to fall back on one's own disciplinary pursuits, and the time had come to at least harbor the illusion or cherish the desire that something could be done, also by architects. It would be naive to ignore that something was lost that way too, since architecture (and art, and culture in general) as a symbolic bastion against politicization and instrumentalization, important for society, was beginning to be dismantled from within, because usefulness and expedience, instead of playfulness and intellectual opacity, became reflexive requirements.*

Following this interpretation, 1907 . . . After the Party put on a show about the end of architecture as we knew it, and as it had been exhibited and celebrated during successive editions of the Venetian biennale since the late 1970s— what is that event, after all, if not a celebration of architecture? A more literally materialist, but not less historicist, reading could zoom in on the stuff confetti is usually made of. To make confetti, one must shred or perforate paper: a hole puncher is, therefore, the most widely available machine for making confetti, at home or in the office. Although in 2008 a hole puncher could still be found on almost every desktop, the ongoing digitalization has since turned the archiving of perforated documents in ring binders into an outdated, if not otherworldly, sad, and time- consuming activity. If paper is considered a material that we can do without, what does this say about confetti? A deluge of small pieces of colored paper, in the empty building of a pavilion at an architecture biennale, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century: how could this not be seen as the enactment of that ancient battle between printed words on paper and meaningful buildings in stone—a conflict that Victor

Hugo most famously staged in his novel Notre- Dame de Paris from 1831?7 Instead of a disagreement, however, it's also possible to speak of an entente: for centuries, architecture culture was based on the continuous collaboration between buildings and books, between constructing and printing, and between stone (or concrete, wood, steel, glass . . .) and paper. This was a party too, or rather a kind of dance: architects made projects and buildings, and books and magazines were printed to document those achievements, to comment, discuss, interpret, praise, or reject them. In the other direction, all that paper ignited and nourished architectural production, by theorizing the future and mapping out paths for practice. Wasn't OFFICe's pavilion, empty and full at the same time, also a calm and cool goodbye to paper? To put it in absolute terms (and disregarding toilet paper): the only thing that material is still good for is to be recycled into confetti. Whether this is a sad determination and a bad thing for architecture remains to be seen: the screen— of a computer or a telephone— has since then become a combination of ally and enemy, as a device to represent buildings by means of shared images, but also as a medium that is asking for attention and that wants to influence what we do and what we think.

Whatever had been celebrated or mourned in those exhibition spaces, it was quite clear that the visitors were too late— they hadn't been invited to the party that was over, and they were experiencing its very end. It leads to even more questions. Who is it that witnesses, after the fact, the rooms where a party took place? Cleaners? Party crashers who got held up in traffic? Night owls with a hangover looking for their keys? Or voyeurs, incapable of real life, and pathetically condemned to spy on other people's lives, which always seem better, more real, and more intense? The decision to expose the remains of an activity rather than that activity itself— perhaps not yet the dust, but certainly the confetti had settled— seems a critique of the architectural exhibition, in line with the assignment of curator Moritz Küng. Architecture should be used; it is there to be lived in, to be experienced "in a state of distraction," as Walter Benjamin expressed it— architecture, just like life, is what happens when you're making other plans, and doing other things.8

What a strange and, indeed, always rather marginal pastime, profession, or passion, so often misunderstood by everyone else: being interested in architecture, and above all in its copies and representations! I remember that during my visit to the Belgian pavilion in the late summer of 2008, my friends and I couldn’t resist the temptation to grab bunches of confetti and throw it at each other. The Italian attendant reprimanded us immediately, possibly out of a personal conviction. He started lecturing us, in broken English, on Guy Debord’s theorization of the society of the spectacle. What was it, indeed, that was being turned into a spectacle here—by us, and by our apparently inappropriate use of the exhibition, but also by the architects? And isn’t the whole idea of an architecture biennale the most direct proof of the fact that we live in a society hooked on simulacra and spectacles? In 1986, Manfredo Tafuri looked back on the very first architecture biennale in Venice of 1980, the Strada Novissima curated by Paolo Portoghesi—also both a real and a fake architectural space—by describing it scornfully as “a very different sense of spectacle, confining wood and papier-mâché to the realm of ‘fiction’: a development of a new realm opened to the architectural imagination by more modern circuits of information and consumption.”[9] In 1907 . . . After the Party, the belatedness—with paper reduced to its tiniest form—but also the lasting attraction of those circuits were shown, confronting the architectural community (which OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen, of course, want to belong to and excel in) with its own object of desire, by fulfilling and withholding it at the same time.

It is very well possible to go on like this for a while, and to risk yet more Hineininterpretieren: perhaps particularly today, that temporary marriage of an existing building with confetti, sealed by a few walls, can continue to lend itself to exegesis, also thanks to its encouraging title. The question is, however, whether all those words aren’t completely beside the point. The most obvious quality of 1907 . . . After the Party has nothing to do with interpretation or explanation in a text: it was a real space, a set of rooms for living in, that didn’t exist before as such, that altered a place, one century old, in a drastic yet also temporary and, all in all, subtle or rather concise way, and that was pleasant to be in, not least because it was quiet, closed off, calm, like a kind of limbo between inside and outside, between real and unreal (an impression enhanced by the ghostlike reflections of the steel walls), but also between private and public, which no party is ever quite. Anne Lacaton, a member of the jury that selected OFFICe at the end of the preliminary competition, admitted this was an important argument during the discussion: “[They] left room for the ‘housing’ aspect. They made room to receive people, they offer something, something positive, a garden. They offer a moment of pleasure. They make it possible for the visitor to enjoy the tranquility and calm of the garden and the pavilion. Their creation works on the senses and it is generous.”[10]

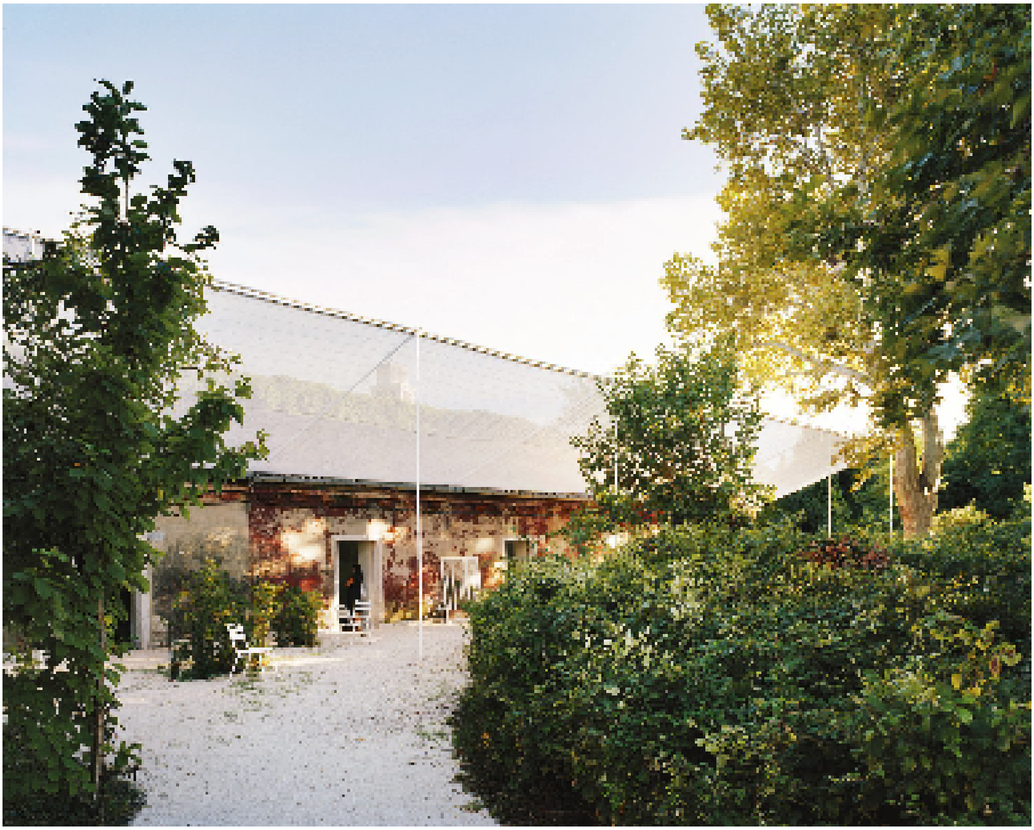
The phenomenological experience presented also connects, or disconnects, 1907 . . . After the Party with the rest of the biennale of 2008. The thematic exhibition in the Arsenale that year was curated by Aaron Betsky, and it was entitled Out There: Architecture beyond Building, resulting, as Brian Hatton has suggested, in an “entropic bag, which seemed but a bricolage of diffuse mythologies.”[11] Whether OFFICe’s intervention really went “beyond building” can be both confirmed and contradicted: on the one hand, 1907 . . . After the Party, showed the results of building, and was indeed much more— conceptually— than a plain construction; on the other hand, it was beyond nothing at all, affirming (and reducing) architecture as an act of separation from, exactly, the world “out there.” It also gives the project something polemical, not without arrogant and elitist undertones: this was a refuge, presented as the only exception in and from the biennale, and from everything that passes for architecture culture; by resolutely detaching itself, the whole caboodle, all the other pavilions as well as everything that Betsky had assembled, was put in its place— ironically, with conviction as well as with sprezzatura.

That’s why 1907 . . . After the Party would have been more in its right place at the biennale two years later, curated by Kazuyo Sejima. It’s even possible to speculate about the extent to which the Belgian pavilion in 2008 influenced the concept and title of the 2010 edition— People Meet in Architecture— given the conspicuous presence, that year, of “real” spaces, architectural installations, and proper interventions. In any case, OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen was invited by Sejima to contribute to People Meet in Architecture too. They were assigned a place that had never been part of the machinery of the biennale: a semiderelict storage building at the far end of the Arsenale, on the border of the Giardino delle Vergini, and the very last thing that visitors in 2010 encountered. The location itself gave this project— entitled Garden Pavilion (7 rooms, 21 perspectives) and awarded the Silver Lion for Promising Young Participant— an air of adventure and discovery, but also of ongoing colonization: in search of ever more exhibition space, the biennale was once more expanding, and this wild, overgrown, forgotten garden would now be cleaned up, and enlisted.

On the one hand, OFFICe seemed to do the exact opposite of what they did in 2008: inside the existing seven rooms, with worn-out brick vaults and old wooden or stone floors, aluminum plates were placed with images of real or imagined buildings and spaces—photographs made by Bas Princen (of structures of unknown authorship, but also of projects by OFFICe, such as 1907 . . . After the Party) or computer-assembled perspectival collages of their designs. It was a way to show the affinities between the method of a photographer and a duo of architects who had been collaborating for years— to explain how looking at a building, a structure, or a space always also means framing and designing it, by tracing the borders it imposes with the rest of the world thanks to formal abstraction. The photography by Princen is “about the relationship we have with elements, objects, architectures and (micro)landscapes,” to quote from a text by Kersten Geers from 2016, and the juxtapositions in those rooms in Venice showed how that is true for architecture too, and certainly for the architecture of OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen.12

On the other hand, this seemingly traditional exhibition, filled with representations of architecture, was seized to build yet another new project: outside, pencil-thin, white steel posts supported a stretched-gauze roof, silvery and reflective, following the existing building’s facade, mirroring its pitch roof, and creating— well, yes: an architecture in which people meet. Exactly that social opportunity and generosity connects Garden Pavilion (7 rooms, 21 perspectives) from 2010 with 1907 . . . After the Party from 2008: what was created where spaces in which architecture (the architecture of the exhibition, the projects on show, but also everything the biennale itself had to offer) could easily be forgotten but could also, of course, be contemplated and discussed. The most significant presence, in that regard, in the pavilions from 2008 and 2010 hasn’t been mentioned yet: chairs, freely available in a confetti-like, and ever-changing, composition. Although this seating furniture was produced by a Belgian company, its design as well as its colors clearly mimic the classic steel chairs that have been found since 1923, when they were first made by the workplace of the city of Paris, in parks such as the Tuileries, the Jardin de Luxembourg, and the Palais-Royal. Found within the confines of the most important architectural exhibition worldwide, this *symbol of modern, enlightened, and metropolitan public life—if not of a Habermasian Stukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit— becomes both the perfect metaphor and the indispensable tool, not so much for architecture as for architecture culture: everything that makes architecture, and what it relates to, discernible, negotiable, debatable, understandable, and therefore subject to change. Architecture culture is what happens when the subject of architecture is put forward, and when chairs are available to sit on, and then to watch, listen, think, and talk.*

While that definition, and the existence of that culture, may seem obvious, it is anything but— not at a biennale (as said, a historical and quite recent phenomenon), not in the Western world, and certainly not in Belgium, the country where Kersten Geers and David Van Severen were born, in 1975 and 1978, respectively. It opens yet another window for interpretation: how contextual, in the national sense, was 1907 . . . After the Party? How did it stage Belgian architecture and its conditions at the beginning of the twenty- first century, instead of allegorizing a celebration, a farewell, or a funeral of Western architecture in general? For starters, Belgium is evenly covered with confetti too, as one of the most densely but randomly built countries in the world—the epitome of sprawl. In this sense, OFFICe made the pavilion from 1907 truly national, by turning it into a scale model of a country. At the same time, the party metaphor can also be applied to the building culture in Belgium: architects have, for a long time, felt as if they had been invited to a party but not allowed in by the bouncer. It became a commonplace to claim that neither architecture nor architecture culture exist in Belgium, with the exception of the "grand masters" of the art nouveau. This was noted by local critics and historians, however few they were, but it was also a part of foreign analysis. In 1961, for example, G. E. Kidder Smith published The New Architecture of Europe: An Illustrated Guidebook and Appraisal. He found Belgium, however, impossible to praise: "Belgium has produced little of merit, architecturally speaking, since the first World War. With turn- of- the- century pioneers like Baron Horta and Henry Van de Velde behind Belgian architectural efforts, this is doubly disturbing. Of all European countries, Belgium is least to be excused for not contributing more to contemporary architecture. Having a thoroughly literate and capable population of nine million and an extremely high living- standard, the mediocrity of its architecture can be explained only by the indifference



OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen, Garden Pavilion, Venice. Architecture Biennale, 2010. Photograph by Bas Princen.

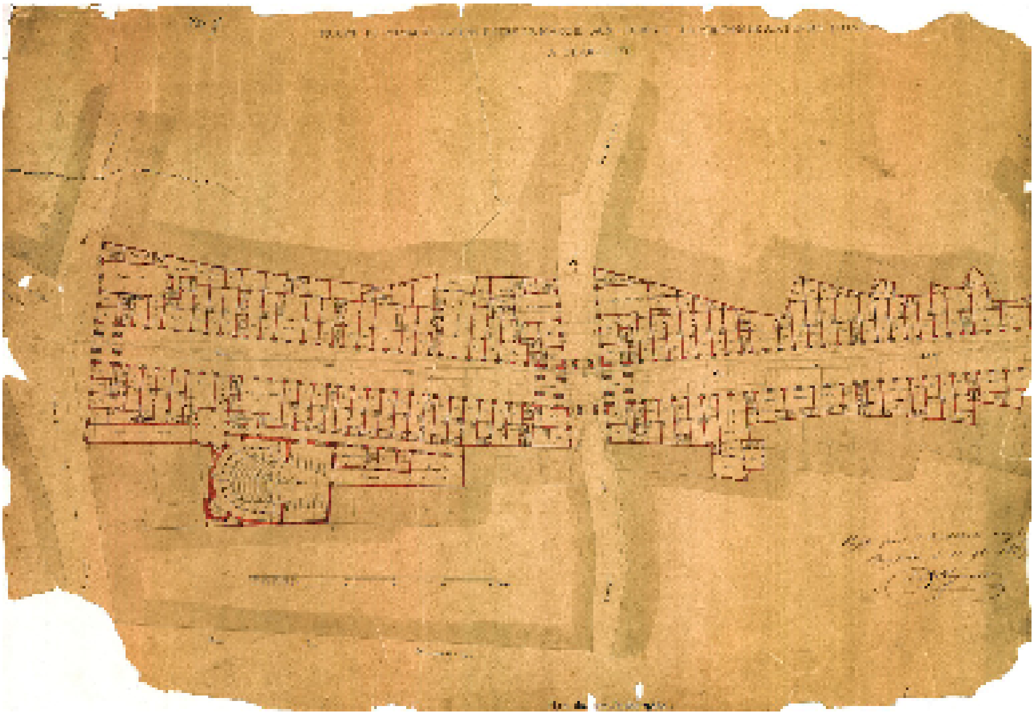
of its officials, the inadequacy of its educational system, and a flabby materialism."13 Belgian architects generally agreed. Generations prior to that of Geers and Van Severen, ever since the foundation of the country in 1830, have indeed either retreated to designing and building, renouncing every kind of criticism, theory, and self- reflection, or they have accompanied their activities with denunciations of the lamentable state of architecture in their country— caused by a lack of full-fledged and qualitative assignments, as well as by the absence of a collective and public debate about the art of building.

It is, of course, possible to add that this is what architects do, just like a large portion of their fellow human beings: complain— and more specifically, complain about the lack of opportunities that prevent them from thriving by fulfilling what they consider to be their role in society, while they receive hardly any recognition or praise for all their hard work. There are plenty of examples. In 1859, Jean-Pierre Cluysenaar published a book in Brussels to give an overview of the numerous country houses, castles, farms, and garden pavilions he had built so far in the Belgian countryside, in a very eclectic but most often Italianate style. Despite all those achievements, he pilloried the status of architecture in his country, particularly because so much was being built by amateurs, craftsmen, and dilletantes, instead of by real, qualified architects:

> *The owner who proposes to build must, above all, be concerned with the choice of a capable architect. We have to say it: in Belgium, the profession of architect does not enjoy the consideration with which it is justly honored in other countries. The influence of the architect, as an artist, is almost nil in Belgium. . . . This aberration has often had the result of depraving public taste, to such an extent that architects of real merit, who have proven themselves on many occasions, have often witnessed how tinkerers get hold of all the commissions, although they are true traveling salesmen who treat our noble art as the production of junk.14*

This tirade can easily be put into perspective, since Cluysenaar had not much to complain about. He was very prolific, and thanks to his connections to the high bourgeoisie, to Masonic circles as well as to the royal family, he was able to carry out public projects too, mainly in Brussels. His most famous building is still one of the *more important public places in the city, although it is an interior that is privately owned— a passage, or shopping arcade: the Royal Saint- Hubert Galleries, built between 1845 and 1847. Inspired by the Galerie d'Orléans in Paris, which was designed in 1830 by Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine as part of the Palais-Royal, it was funded by a private investment company of which the architect himself was a part—a fact that indicates how architects had to create assignments on their own. Its exceptional proportions— narrow but high, like the nave of a cathedral— were made possible by allowing the steel trusses of the glass roof to rest at the height of the frame: a combination of engineering and design ingenuity that is indeed the privileged achievement of an architect.*

Despite Cluysenaar's self- pity and exaggeration— which quite often testify to a healthy dose of ambition—he rightly pointed out that there was a problem with architecture and its culture in Belgium, a problem that has to do with a lack of public commissions and the absence of a well-informed audience that is genuinely interested in architecture and that asks for it. Similar laments by Belgian architects can be found from the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century, and recent accounts indicate that the problem still exists, especially in the southern part of the country, and that it has got worse. In 2021, Pierre Hebbelinck, based in Liège and one of the most important contemporary architects in Wallonia, published a collection of writings by Olivier Verdique, project architect of the museum for contemporary art close to Mons that Hebbelinck's office completed in 2002. Under the alias of Alvar Le Corvanderpius, Verdique wrote a series of short satirical lampoons before and after the turn of the twenty- first century, illustrating how architects are being held responsible for more and more things, while their freedom to design is increasingly limited by building regulations, often newly issued by the European Union. In comparison with Cluysenaar's text of almost a century and a half earlier, there are important differences. By the end of the twentieth century, the authorities were clearly interfering with architecture and urban planning, but in such a way that, ultimately, private initiative once more prevailed, to the greater honor and glory of the construction industry but to the detriment of the territory. Another evolution was the widening gap between the northern and southern halves of Belgium, ever since the process of federalization started in the 1970s. To a certain degree, Verdique may be idealizing the architectural profession in



Jean-Pierre Cluysenaar, Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert, Brussels, November 1839, first project. City Archives Brussels.

northern Flanders, but he does so primarily to address the problems in southern Wallonia. When reading a 2001 issue of Béton, the journal of the federation of the concrete industry, he notices that all the published projects are in Flanders, with one exception . . . located in the German-speaking region:

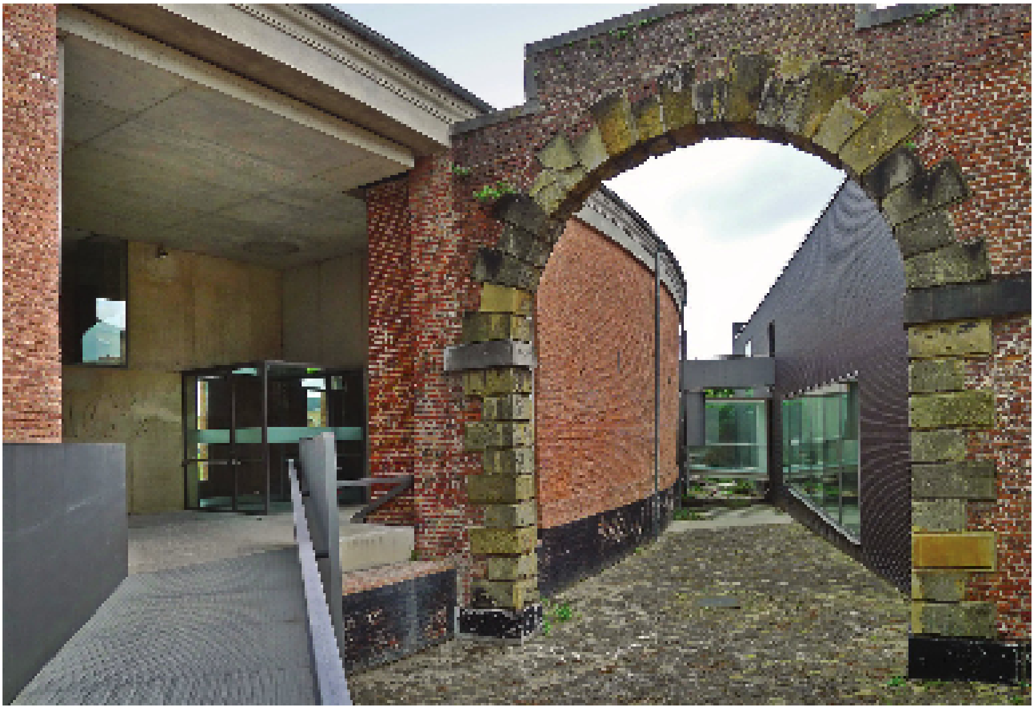
> *This much is clear: concrete facades are not authorized in the Walloon part of the country; the sacrosanct brick in tones of reddish brown dominates all regulations, monopolizes all the subdivision permits and this often despite common sense. It is truly spiteful. Belgium already has an architecture of two different speeds and, without exaggerating a pervading corporatism, it is better to build anywhere else than in the Walloon Region. . . . Look at everything that our Flemish colleagues can afford themselves to do: okay, there is a bit of this and a bit of that, but above all there is inventiveness, exception, joy; flat roofs, polychrome, polygonal plans, oblique lines, round windows, zinc roofing, and so on.15*

As with Cluysenaar, mutatis mutandis, it is possible to object by confronting Verdique with his own achievements. The museum he built with Pierre Hebbelinck, as a renovation and extension to an industrial coal-mining complex and company town from the early nineteenth century, has all those qualities he so dearly misses in Walloon architecture: Tadaoesque surfaces of concrete, walls in stylish black brick, sloping access paths, accentuated entrances, trapezoidal windows, and exceptional spaces. In fact, the museum in Grand-Hornu has all those things in abundance, as a quite coquettish building that wants to prove its own merits, arising from a difficult, laborious, incidental, and searching design process— the opposite of sprezzatura. It is, in size and importance, indeed an exception rather than the norm in Wallonia, but it is also an exception, one could argue, that is exemplary for an architecture with an inferiority complex.

Another thing that Verdique points out as a major problem is the existence of just what Cluysenaar asked for: the official recognition of architect as a profession, and the resulting possibility of establishing a national professional association. The first thing happened in Belgium in 1939, when a law was passed stipulating that licensed architects have a monopoly on the design *of buildings and structures, making them de facto indispensable, even if it is to sign a plan rather than to draw it. Much was expected of that law: according to architect Jozef Schellekens, writing in 1944, the fact that it had taken so long to be enacted was nothing less than an explanation for the ugliness of Belgium: "An innumerable series of planners exploited ignorance and bourgeois vanity; their distasteful products increasingly disfigured our towns, villages, and landscapes; the dignity of the profession was dealt a death blow. The confusion of minds mainly served the interests of parasitic elements."16*

The foundation of the Order of Architects in 1963 was a logical if belated consequence of the law of 1939, since it was necessary to have an official organ that could monitor compliance. During the reconstruction after the Second World War, many contractors, workers, or residents decided to pretend to be architects, simply to get the work done without much ado, which in turn was experienced as very disadvantageous by licensed architects. Together, the 1939 law and the 1963 founding of the Order of Architects create a chain of Kafkaesque obligations: in order to get something built, you need an architect; to be an architect, you need to have a diploma, but you also have to be a member of the Order; as a member of the Order, you have to follow the deontology of the architect, which stipulates how something has to be built, no matter how small or insignificant.

It leads to a double bind. The utopian, technocratic desire underlying the existence of the Order is that architecture can be, together with its deontology, officially "arranged." What good architecture is— what architects should and shouldn't do— is decided by the Order, because it can be determined objectively, with or without the help of other scientific disciplines. In reality, of course, such a code or policy for architecture doesn't exist: architectural decisions are never conclusive or consensual, and they cannot be fixed by rules once and for all, no matter how much the Order would like that. The only true consequence of its existence, therefore, is that only the Order can "officially" decide on and discuss architecture, because only the members of the Order are experts with a degree, who are dependent on architecture to make a living. What all this ultimately means is that not only building but everything about architecture becomes the exclusive right of architects. An open, public, unbiased, and disinterested



Atelier d’architecture Pierre Hebbelinck, Musée des Arts Contemporains, Grand-Hornu, 2002. Photograph by Serge Brison.

ARCHITECTUUR·STEDEBOUW·BEELDENDE KUNST
1983
WONEN TABK
BOUWEN
LAATSTE STEEN
VAN BELGIË
DERNIERE PIERRE
DE BELGIQUE
30.3.79
OP BELGISCHE GRONDEN

WonenTA/BK, no. 15 (1983), cover.

conversation about architecture is prohibited by law. How could an architecture culture bloom in such circumstances?

The deepest crisis resulting from this neurotic arrangement occurred on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Belgium. The journal A+, published in Brussels in two versions, Dutch and French, since 1973, subsidized by the Order and distributed to all Belgian architects, invited architecture critic Geert Bekaert to write about his “personal considerations related to the evolution of architecture in Belgium.”[17] Bekaert wrote the essay, with a length of almost 13,000 words, and submitted it at the end of the summer of 1980 to the editorial board. During the fall, the manuscript and its French translation started to circulate among students and architects. It even reached the author himself, who had not yet received a response from the editors. In the spring of 1981, the executive committee of A+, nearly identical to the board of the Order, decided not to publish Bekaert’s text, after which the editorial committee resigned. In the summer of 1981, that committee announced a press conference: all would be revealed, and copies of Bekaert’s text would be made freely available. The press conference never took place. It was only in the summer of 1983 that the essay was published, in the Dutch magazine wonen- TA/BK (later known as Archis, and currently as Volume).

The title of the offending text is “Let anyone who has anything to say come forward and be silent.” The subtitle reads “Thoughts of an outsider— outsiders have an easy time speaking.” The main title is a quotation from Austrian poet and polemicist Karl Kraus, taken from his essay, published in 1914 in his journal Die Fackel, satirically ridiculing the platitudes and abuse of language in his country, especially following the start of the First World War.[18] Bekaert was not the first to use this aphorism in an architectural publication. In 1976, writing about the American works of Mies van der Rohe, Manfredo Tafuri used Kraus’s words to recapitulate the German architect’s decision to silence his architecture— the Seagram Building in Manhattan in particular—because no true communication nor signification is possible in a society totally dominated by money and profit.[19] The quotation by Bekaert can be said to well up from the same critical sources, but its aim was different. He did not request architecture to “speak” or to be “silent,” to become a kind of language or a mute form, or to forsake linguistic games altogether, but rather sought to make clear that architecture craves language and argumentation to come into being. It is a thought that Adrian Forty has succinctly summarized, not by chance in a text on another important “national” critic, Nikolaus Pevsner: “Architecture is not a single- medium activity, consisting only of built works— buildings alone do not make ‘architecture.’ It is only through being spoken, or written about, that buildings become truly social, for until people have exchanged their thoughts about them, they remain merely isolated objects. Without language, there would be no architecture.”[20] Bekaert insisted that such a conversation about architecture, and such a social existence of the built environment, should be possible in Belgium too, even— or rather, especially— when that conversation had been, so far, prevented by corporatism, and by the professional self- interest and self- protection of architects. A+’s rejection of the text ultimately proved him right, although it must be said that he was not exactly friendly to the magazine that had invited him. In the text from 1980, he wrote:

> A coherent architectural critique is not allowed, and, again, this has to do with the working method of A+, which prevents it from arriving at any form of coherent thinking, or of thinking tout court, whether it is biased or not. The only thing that is allowed is publishing messages. . . . But a grab bag full of information and individual contributions does not make up a magazine and cannot even be described as open- minded. . . . It is not about defending a one-person magazine, or one type of magazine, but about systematically making it impossible to construct and exchange thoughts. . . . It’s stultifying. Everything dull, gray, and boring. Architecture turns out to be a mind-numbing, unpassionate activity, which, moreover, gives its practitioners and its reviewers a bad conscience. Then why not shut up about it altogether?[21]

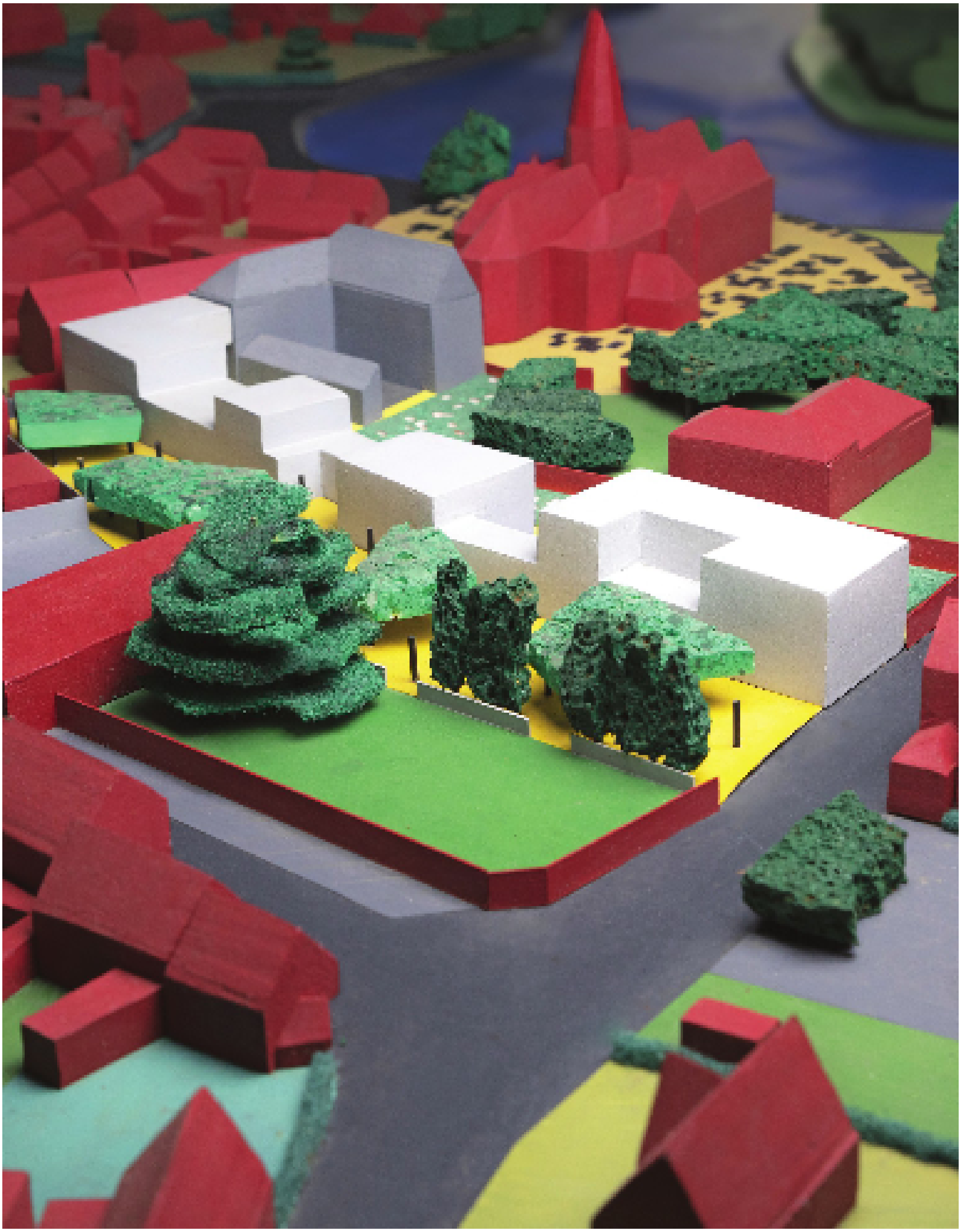
This rhetorical question was not followed up— not by Bekaert, who remained, until his death in 2016, the most prolific Belgian architecture critic, nor by others. While it would go too far to claim that the different evolution, since the 1980s, of architecture in Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgium is explained by this fact, it is striking that the French translation of Bekaert’s text has only circulated as a bootleg, and has never been properly published. If his criticism did have consequences, this was mainly the case *in Flanders, and the first language used in Belgium to talk about architecture has been Dutch. It has equally been of great help that (at least until the turn of the century) rejected Belgian texts could end up in publications from the Netherlands, for which Belgian critics could write. Of course, economic, political, and cultural differences between the two regions in Belgium play an important role too. And yet it was no coincidence that an almost direct reply to Bekaert's diatribe from 1980, or an update of it, appeared almost twenty years later in a 1998 yearbook collecting the recent production in Flanders. Maarten Delbeke contributed an essay with a title that sounded familiar: "Who Has Anything to Say about Architecture, Come Forward and Pull Out a Chair."22 Delbeke argued that things had changed: there were now good buildings available, designed by architects who wrote and theorized, and there were ample opportunities to turn them into architecture by talking or writing. It sufficed—to return to the metaphor inspired by OFFICe's 2008 pavilion— to sit down, look around, and develop and exchange thoughts.*

The Belgian presence at the Venice Architecture Biennale, prior to 2008, further illustrates this turnaround or evolution. When the first edition in which national pavilions took part was organized in 1991—the self-titled biennale curated by Francesco Dal Co— culture had already become a department of the federal governments, which means (and this applies to the art biennale too) that Flanders and Wallonia alternately represent Belgium. In 1991, a foundation from Ghent, led by critic Marc Dubois and architect Christian Kieckens, which had been organizing events and publishing books and a magazine since the early 1980s, curated the exhibition Architetti (della Fiandra), showing recent buildings from architects such as Marie- José Van Hee, Xaveer De Geyter, and Paul Robbrecht & Hilde Daem, by means of models, drawings, photographs, and plans. "I hope to show, with this exhibition," wrote Patrick Dewael, the Flemish Minister of Culture since 1986, in the catalog, "that Flanders has a large potential of valuable architects who ought to get the recognition they deserve, in Flanders as well as abroad."23 The exhibition disclosed a simultaneously promotional and nationalistic commitment: it was time for Flanders, as a relatively "new" and prosperous region, to show its self-confidence, and to look forward to the future.

The biennale of 1991 was also taken as an opportunity to present a scoop: the selected design for a new museum devoted to the work of Belgian painter Roger Raveel. It was a symbolic and celebratory announcement: for the first time in decades, a public building would be realized, designed by someone who was recognized, if not cherished, by the architectural community. Stéphane Beel's museum, moreover, acted as a pars pro toto for the trustful, unmistakably different, but at the same time gentle presence of contemporary architecture in Flanders— in this case, in the difficult, dense, small-grained context of a Flemish village, where Raveel had lived and worked all his life. Composed— like a slightly bent spine that has aged slowly and irregularly— out of four or five Miesian volumes, a tiny bit skewed, and connected by a careful promenade architecturale, it offers different ways to look at Raveel's colorful and bold paintings of the everyday, but also at the quiet, surrounding village.

The museum in Grand- Hornu by Pierre Hebbelinck fulfilled a similar function when Wallonia programmed the Belgian pavilion in 2002, eleven years later. The exhibition, entitled Les îles flottantes, showed about the same number of buildings and projects as Architetti (della Fiandra) in 1991, but the tone was different, and optimism did not prevail. "The francophone region of Belgium," curator Maurizio Cohen wrote in the catalog, "is slowly beginning to emerge from several years of cultural obscurantism in the field of architecture— both public and private sector— where a virulent tenacity continues to vent its fury against the very notion of contemporary architecture."24 Whether this is— or was ~~so~~ very different in Flanders depends on one's point of view, but at least in that region, "the absence of an architecture culture," as Geert Bekaert wrote in the 1991 catalog, was cheerfully taken on "as a challenge."25

The voluntarism— or, perhaps more precisely, the absence of cultural pessimism— of critics and architects in Flanders led quite soon to institutional change as well, also because of the often close and personal ties with politicians who were willing to commit themselves to architecture, as an important instrument of the welfare state. Flemish Minister of Finance, Budget, and Health Policy Wivina Demeester of the Christian Democratic party put it this way in 1998: "If a government wishes to look after its inhabitants well, it can achieve this partly by contributing to a public domain designed with care and attention and by functioning as an exemplary client. This should be considered the essence of Flemish architectural policy."26 Inspiration came, again, from the Netherlands, where on the one hand the position of Chief Government



Stéphane Beel, Roger Raveelmuseum, Machelen-aan-de- Leie, 1989, model.

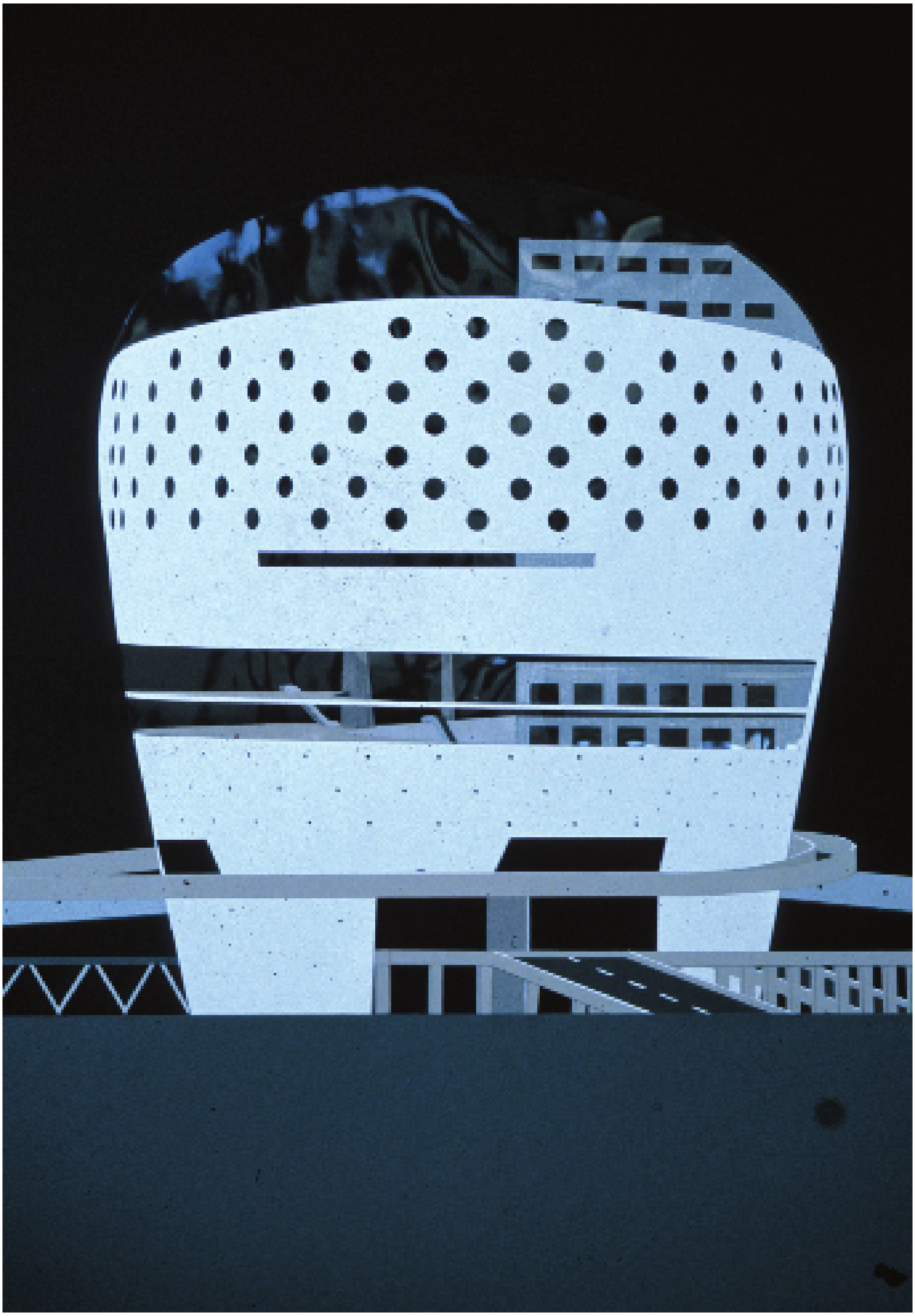
Architect has existed, under one name or another, since 1806, while the Netherlands Architecture Institute had been established in 1988, and was located in Rotterdam in 1993. The first Flemish Government Architect, or Vlaams Bouwmeester, was installed in 1999; the Flemish Architecture Institute was established in 2001. The main task of the former is to supervise assignments from public clients, while the institute is, according to the statement of principle on its website, “the main point of contact for information about architecture from Flanders and Brussels. It creates a meeting place for everyone who wants to create, share, and experience architecture.” In 2007, a similar institution, the Celulle Architecture, was created by Chantal Dassonville within the ministry of the French- speaking community.

The main tool of the Government Architect is the Open Oproep or “Open Call”: a competition that can be organized—it is not mandatory— every time a building or an urban project is realized with public money: for example, when a municipality wants to build a new town hall, when a city thinks of opening a new museum, or when a park or a green space needs to be redeveloped.[27] Inspiration for this procedure came from a trio of competitions in the late 1980s and early 1990s— organized, respectively, by a pressure group, the local authorities, and then a private company—for a Sea Trade Center along the North Sea, for some neglected quarters in the city of Antwerp, and for the expansion of the city of Kortrijk. A common feature of these target areas is that they were peripheral: these weren’t classic public spaces in the center of a historical European city. In this way, the competitions, in which both Belgian and foreign architects participated, made clear that architecture and urban planning are not just a matter of building monumental, representative, and exceptional buildings, for and by an urban elite. On a more methodical level, the initiatives revealed what can be considered another important aspect of a modern architecture culture: when a certain spatial problem, transformation, or desire manifests itself, it is crucial to prepare as reasoned a choice as possible, by offering clearly distinguishable alternatives. Subsequently that choice can be explained by making it part of an argument and a theory. That is why these competitions, like the Open Oproep of the Government Architect ten years later, were meticulously orchestrated and, afterward, extensively commented upon. The selection of architects was judiciously made—the teams were invited, and not everyone could participate. That way, the different projects were effectively different enough, which not only allowed the client to consider a variety of options, but also made the entire procedure exciting and full of contrasts: here something was at stake, and the fact that contradictory approaches presented themselves only increased the sense of urgency and relevance. Ideally, this is what an architectural competition should be: a compass rose, offering prospects for future scenarios that come within reach because they are depicted and articulated.

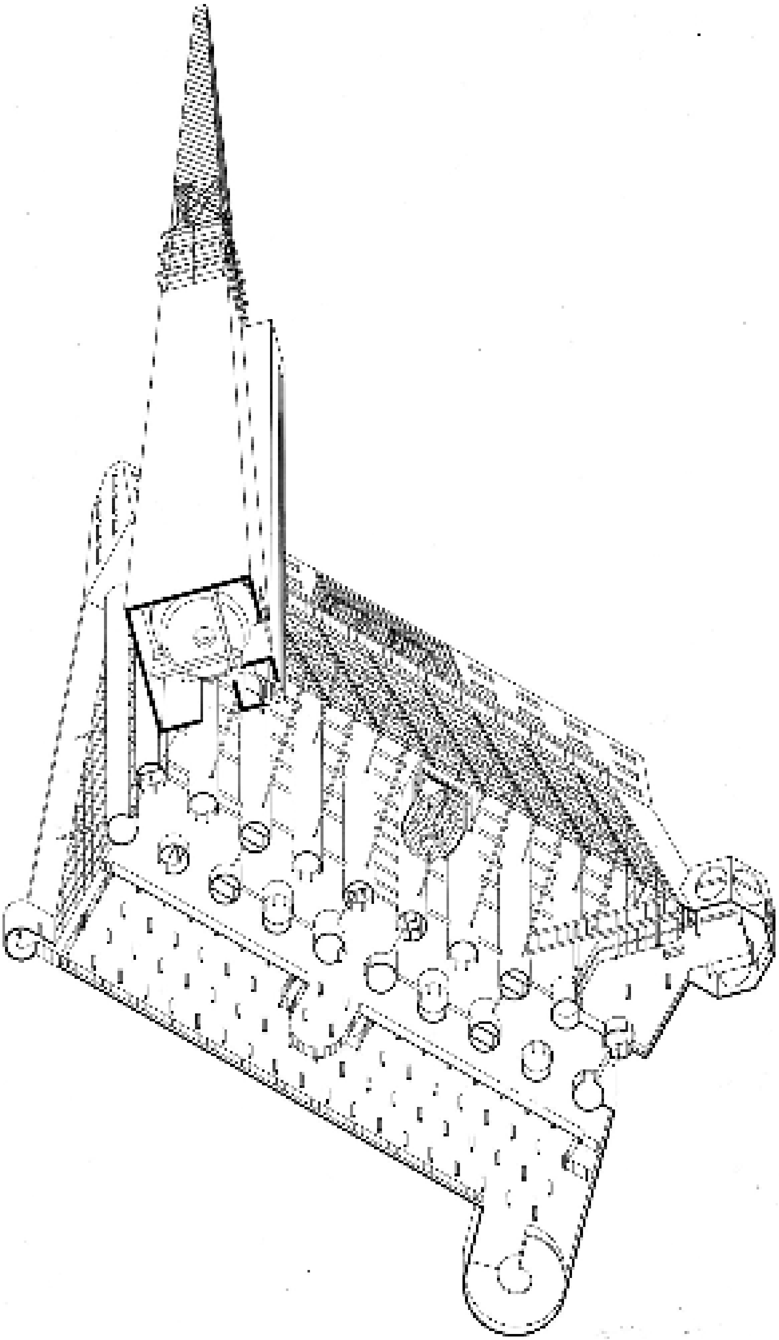
There were only two architects that took part in all three competitions in 1989, 1990, and 1991: OMA/Rem Koolhaas on the one hand, and Bob Van Reeth on the other hand, who would later become the first Vlaams Bouwmeester. In 1989, OMA won the competition for the Sea Trade Center, a terminal for ferries traveling to the United Kingdom, with a project serving as an emblem for the European traffic node that Belgium has always aspired to be, condensing train tracks, highways, and sailing routes in one bulging volume, like a kind of indoor, air- conditioned harbor, or an airport without airplanes.

Precisely that absence, along with the development of the train tunnel under the canal, ultimately resulted in the cancellation of the project: other, new, and faster means of transport presented themselves to traverse Belgium, as well as Europe, in the near future. Van Reeth, in his proposal, also brought all activities together under one roof, but one of a more monumental construction, referring to the agricultural barns of the hinterland, and supplemented with a pointed lighthouse, as if to indicate the partly outdated or even nostalgic ambitions of the entire enterprise, reaching for, in his own words, “the mythical ideal of the communication of goods, persons, and ideas.”[28]

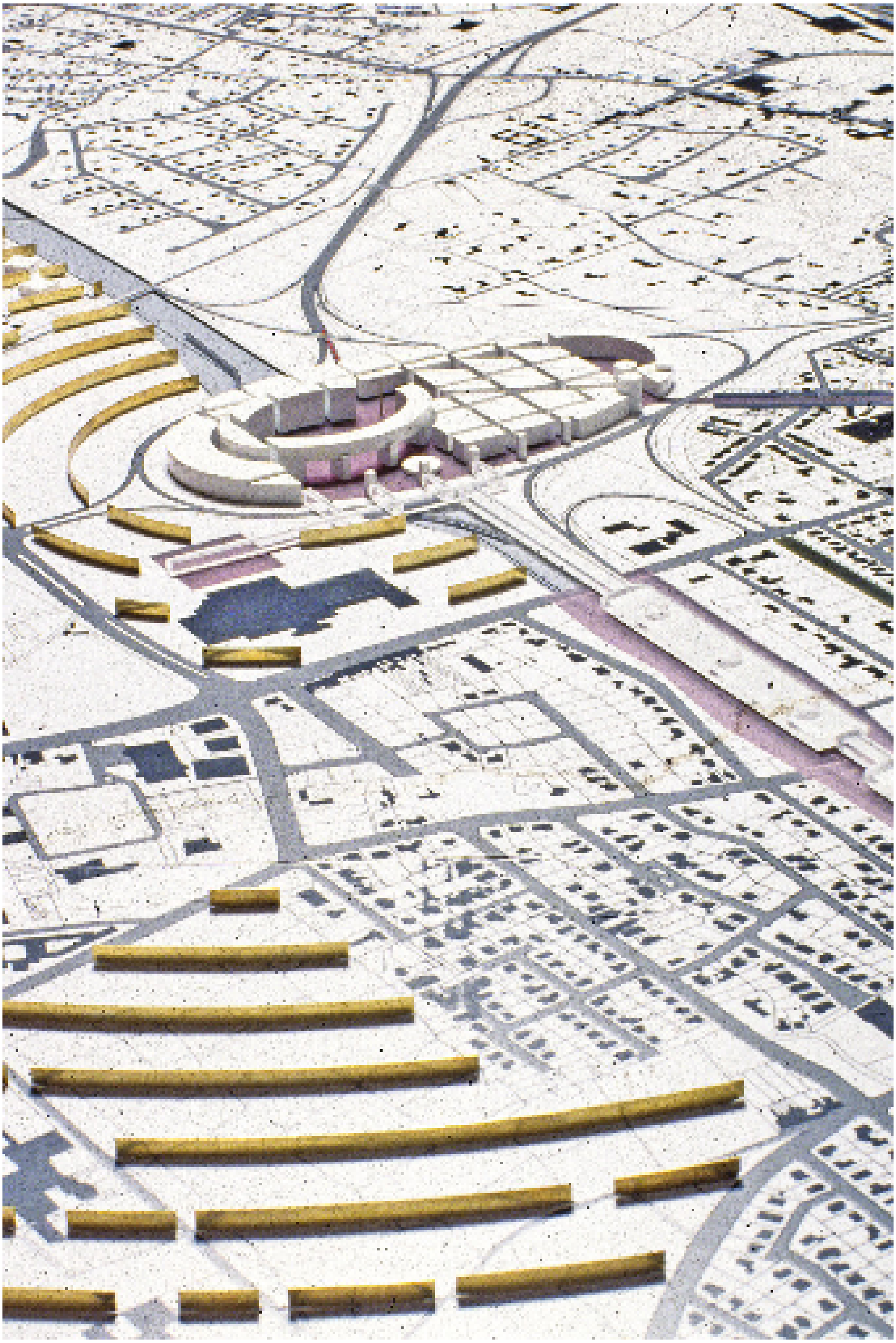
In 1990, Koolhaas once more focused on traffic flows, with a proposal to develop a large, dolphin-shaped motorway junction in Antwerp into a new city district. This would make it possible to keep the Left Bank of the Scheldt (an area on which many other architects had projected their dreams) empty, and to restore it as a “modern Arcadia.”[29] Aloof and illusionless, Koolhaas aimed at visualizing and reinforcing existing contrasts. His approach was again countered by that of Van Reeth, who proposed, in a humanistically progressive way, to connect the Left Bank with the city center by means of a double bridge, visualizing—as the existing tunnels don’t— the unity of Antwerp due to the river it is located



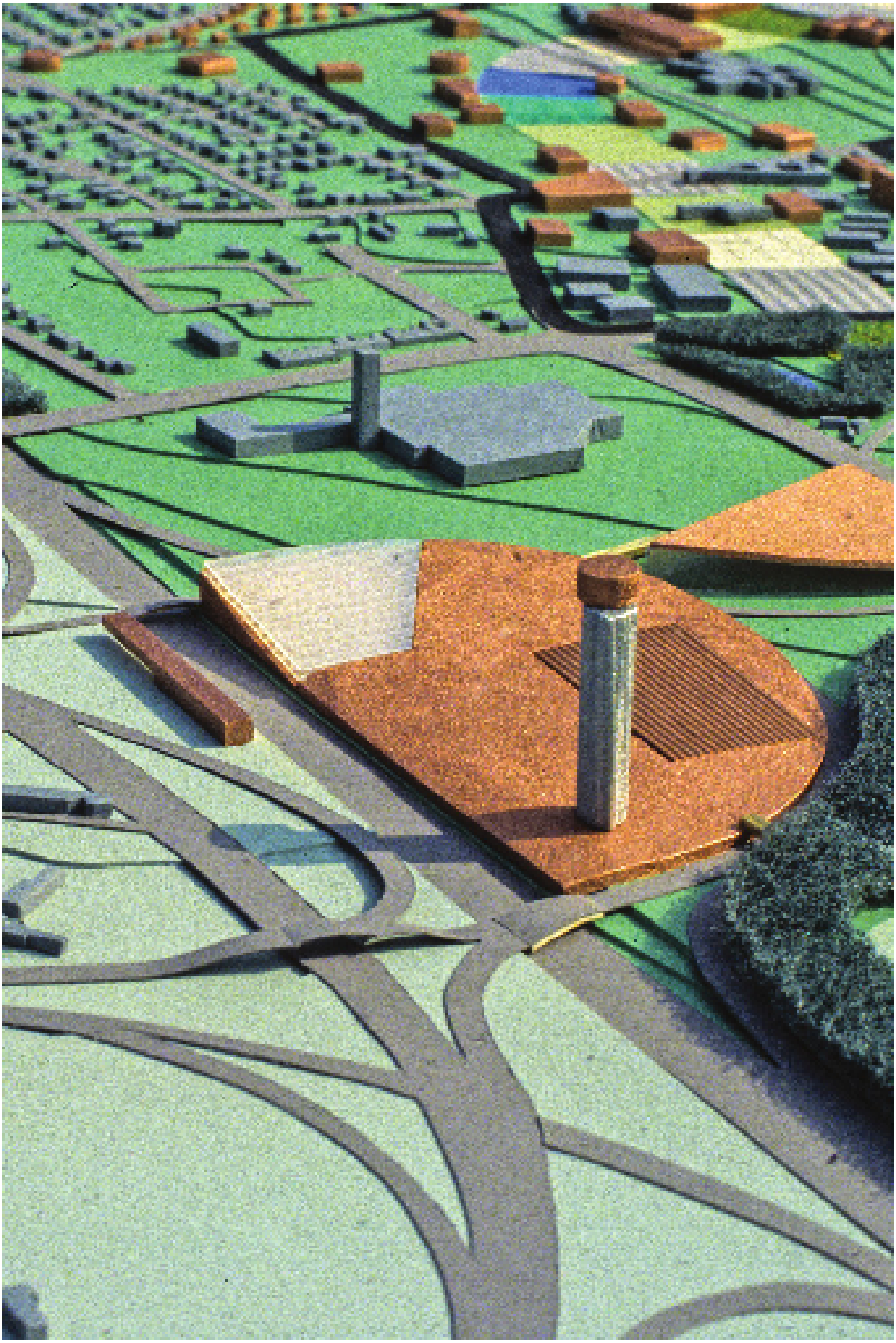
OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Sea Trade Center, Zeebrugge, 1989, drawing. ProLitteris, Zurich, 2022.



Bob Van Reeth, Sea Trade Center, Zeebrugge, 1989.



Bob Van Reeth, Hoog Kortrijk, 1991, model. Archives Geert Bekaert, Ghent University.



OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Hoog Kortrijk, 1991, model. Archives Geert Bekaert, Ghent University.

on. In his project for Kortrijk from 1991— to conclude this trilogy of competitions— Van Reeth was influenced by OMA's proposal for Antwerp from the year before. A central part of the competition area was the "Egg" of Kortrijk: a traffic junction, just outside the city center, and indeed egg-shaped, 800 meters long and 400 meters wide, cut by the highway that connects Kortrijk with Antwerp and Ghent, and, in the other direction, Lille and Paris, at a distance of 250 kilometers. Van Reeth proposed to urbanize this egg to the full, by building, within or just outside its shell, a new train station, hotels, offices, and housing. The remainder of the surrounding periphery could maintain its supposedly rural character, encouraged by circular tree lines, radiated by the egg.

Koolhaas kept the pointed part of the egg empty (with greenery), while cooking its base for so long that it could become "a business platform, a mini La Défense, a small bastion where Kortrijk may exploit its strategic location without losing its qualities."30 In this way, both the possibility of growth and degrowth were imagined, held together by one eggshell.

Just like the dolphin of Antwerp, the egg of Kortrijk would return as a shape in OMA's oeuvre, in the construction of the Congrexpo in Lille, completed in 1994, thirty kilometers to the south, across the border with France. Beyond that, one could say somewhat bitterly, not very much came of these three competitions. The port of Zeebrugge merged with that of Antwerp and said goodbye to passenger transport. For Antwerp, a plan by Manuel de Solà-Morales was selected, but carried out only very piecemeal, while building a bridge across the Scheldt will probably never happen: the unconscious fear of the water seems to loom large. The competition in Kortrijk was won by Bernardo Secchi, but his project, based on a series of structuring galettes in the landscape, could not prevent further suburbanization of this region.

Such a dismissive judgment would reflect a very result- oriented and materialistic view of competitions, and of architecture altogether. On the one hand, the initiatives from these three years have provided inspiration for the public building culture in Flanders. Hundreds of valuable buildings have been realized since, supervised by the team of the Vlaams Bouwmeester, and published and described in almost twenty yearbooks produced by the Flanders Architecture Institute, often resulting in admiration or envy from neighboring countries. In 2012, for example, Ellis Woodman, at the time a guest editor of one of those yearbooks, confirmed the *quality of that production, writing that "Flanders has established itself as home to one of the most progressive architectural cultures in the world."31 On the other hand, and despite all those buildings, the trilogy of competitions from more than thirty years ago also indicates that architecture is not about building. It is about using the possibility of building to envision a desirable future. Architecture culture should enable us to consider what our options are, even when most of the parties are over.*

7 *We Will No Longer Build*

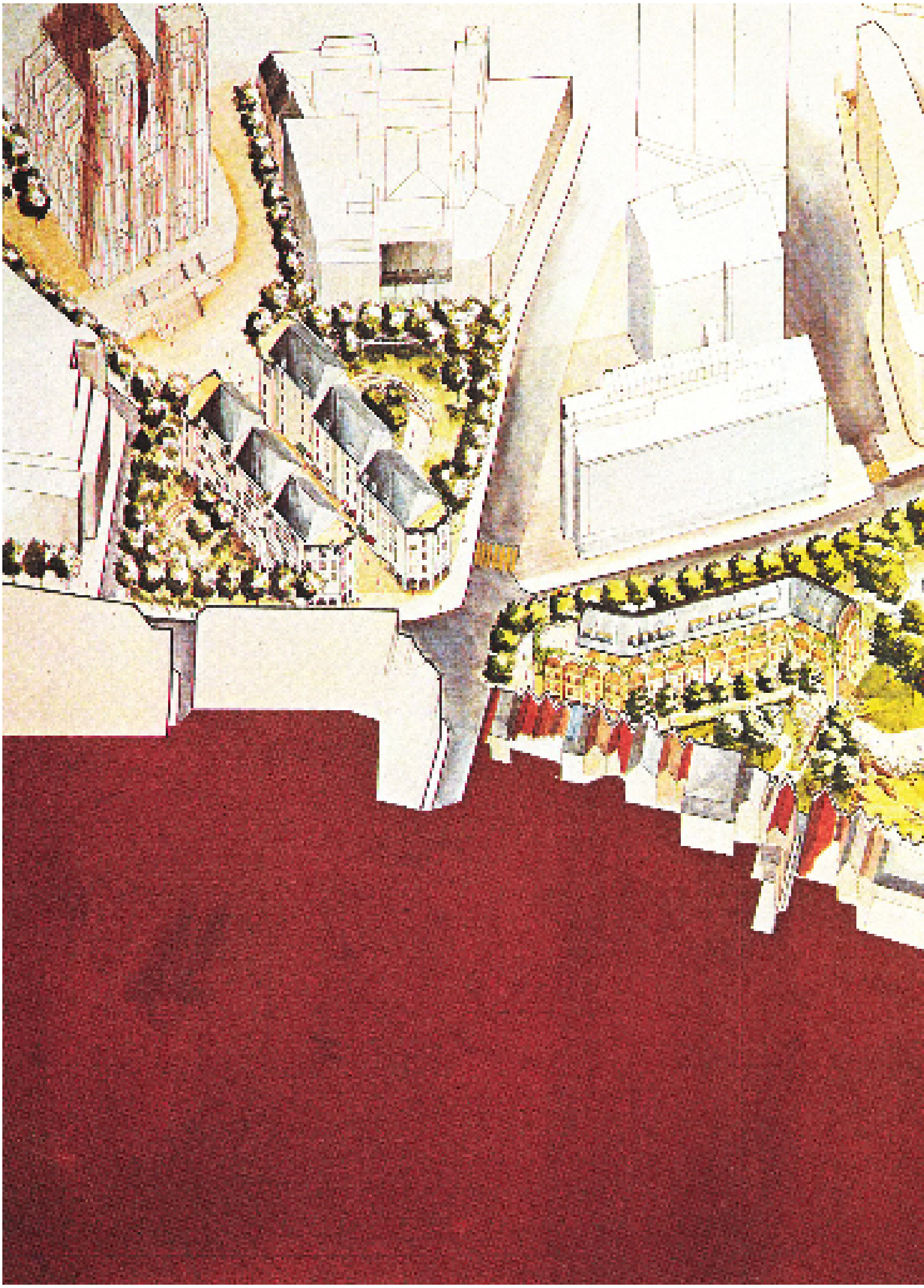
Architecture continues, thanks to consecutive proclamations of its end. To stay alive, it must be declared dead at regular intervals. In this regard, Belgium is well endowed, particularly from the 1960s onward, a decade in which many architects began to wonder whether it wouldn't be better to quit. In 1964, Peter Callebout, the architect of refined, modest houses, wrote:

> *I've been asking myself: does architecture still make sense? . . . I try to answer as well as possible to the commissions provided by my clients, but every day I see how intentions, laid down in the plans, are betrayed by the executors. . . . Engineers cannot help us, for they too have no objective data for the solution of the questions which really concern the "service of man." . . . Actually, we can consider contemporary architecture as an awful deceit, an organized muck, from a moral point of view, since we deliberately deliver bad goods. . . . We know nothing about all kinds of things, and yet we make our decisions.1*

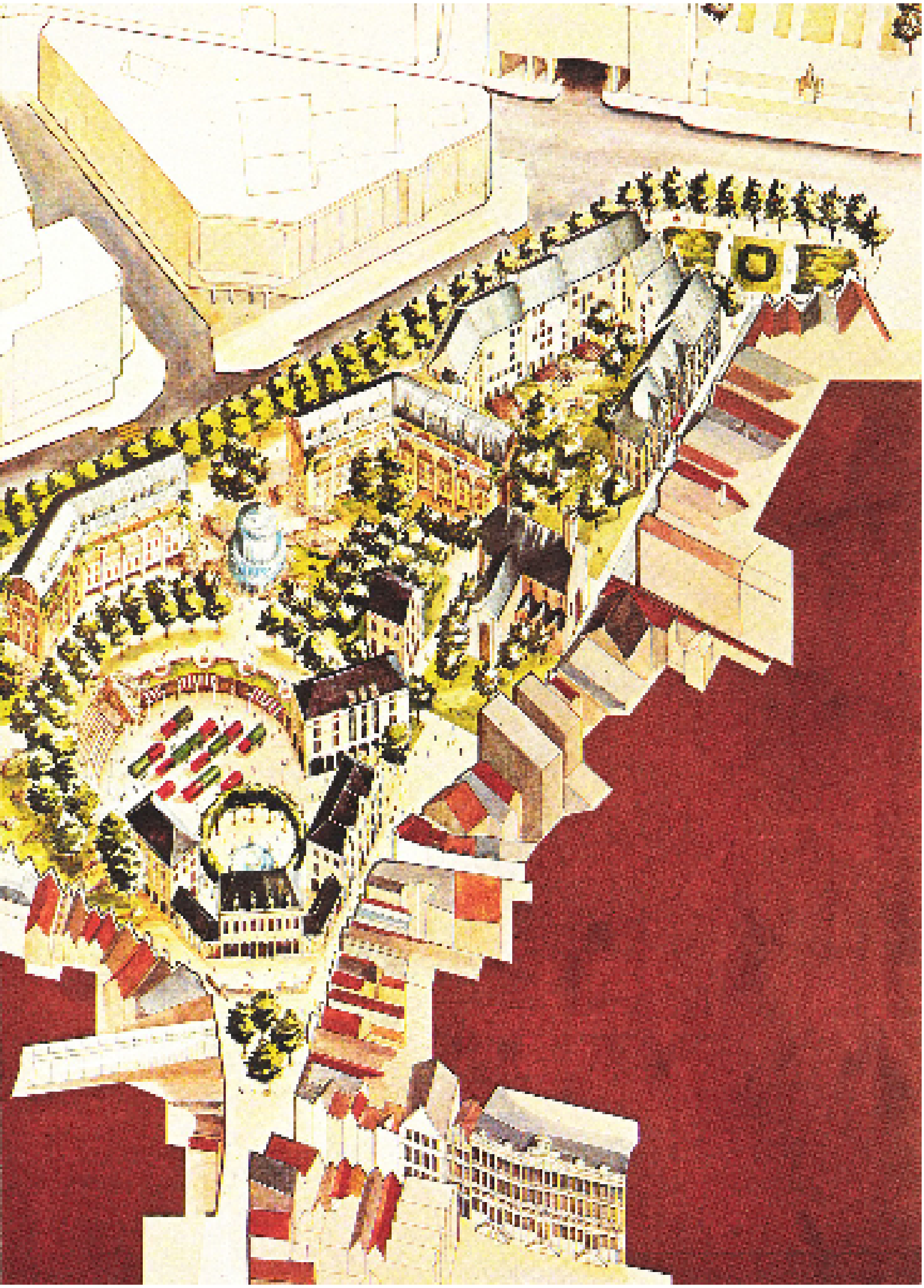
Callebout's doubts arise from the division of labor that makes architects— as designers and intellectuals— dependent on other disciplines and professional groups with different interests, values, and traditions. There is, indeed, a lot that escapes the control *of the profession, while in the end it is the architect who is held responsible for just about everything about a project or a building. In a sense, it puts the architect in an exemplary position, experiencing, both allegorically and concretely, what every human being, from time to time, suffers from: being complicit and powerless at the same time. It is a conflict that far exceeds building itself—as the implementation of carefully drawn plans— and that threatens to swallow everything related to architecture, such as the unfair, unbalanced, and unequal society for which architects build; the amassment of the incompatible desires of clients, residents, or neighbors, as well as their desire to be heard and understood; the context or the landscape the project is a part of, and that it inevitably changes or disturbs; the materials extracted or produced for those buildings; the techniques and machines used to transport and process those materials; the working conditions of the laborers; the time it takes to finish a project; the consequences of all the activities that take place in a building; the way the interiors are heated, cooled, or ventilated; the behavior of users, before and after the services rendered by the architect; the sale, rental, or entrance price of buildings; their right to exist or, on the contrary, their premature obsolescence and inanity; their accessibility, both practically and symbolically; the way those buildings are talked and written about, and how they are photographed and published; and, finally, their afterlife— what happens with the architect's work when it no longer appears to be sufficient, needs to be adjusted, or simply has to disappear as quickly and noiselessly as possible.*

One would quit for less. Condemned to continuously compromise between illusory overconfidence and self- overestimation ("I can do it all, and I take full responsibility") and lazy desertion or self- underestimation ("All I do is compose plans, and I can't be blamed for anything else"), it seems a simple if not brilliant solution to remain an architect and yet to stop building. This is what Léon Krier did, at least for a while. He was born in Luxembourg in 1946, but the defining documents of his personal moratorium were published in Brussels, by the Archives d'Architecture Moderne, cofounded and directed by Maurice Culot. Culot had renounced architectural practice too, in 1968, not least because he saw in Brussels, with his own eyes, what the orthodoxies taught at La Cambre—the school where he had studied, nicknamed the Belgian Bauhaus—could give rise to in a city ruled by interchangeable politicians and promoters.2 Applicable examples of another kind of modern architecture—less abstract and functionalist, more artisanal and somewhat romantic, and, therefore, possibly, resistant to those destructive forces leading to ever more office buildings in glass and steel— that was what Culot, as a teacher, historian, and activist, was trying to assemble in the Archives d'Architecture Moderne (AAM).

He met Krier in London during the summer of 1976, at the Art Net Rally organized by Peter Cook. Culot presented the activities of the Workshop for Urban Research and Action (ArAU), which he was supervising— a design team of volunteers, producing counterproposals as an alternative to bureaucratic, abstract, and money- driven real estate developments, primarily in Brussels. ArAU advocated for more traditional patterns, not destined for cars and office clerks, but on the scale of the resident, preferring streets, blocks, neighborhoods, squares, parks, and crescents. Culot's presentation in London wasn't appreciated, as Grahame Shane reported: "Culot drew criticism from his English audience for what they saw as his archaic and retrogressive view of city life. At one point, Cedric Price, playing devil's advocate for the progressive forces of capitalism, proceeded to praise the machine-city with its efficient, highly automated business core and its beautiful, spacious garden suburbs. Like Le Corbusier, Price compared this utopian vision to the polluted and badly serviced dense urban cores of the traditional European city."3 Krier came to the rescue, defending Culot as the patron of good urban life, and condemning Price as the destroyer of the historical city. For a few years, Krier and Culot were inseparable, causing quite a stir. In the spring of 1977, both their names appeared on the cover of Architectural Design, together with that of Manfredo Tafuri (whose 1973 book Progetto e utopia: Architettura e sviluppo capitalistico had been published in English in 1976), and the title of a text by Bernard Tschumi, "The Pleasure of Architecture."4 The front cover was illustrated with a drawing of Krier's 1976 project for Parc de la Villette in Paris; on the back cover figured one of the proposals of Culot's ArAU, also from 1976, for the Carrefour de l'Europe in Brussels, in front of the Central Station. This empty square in the heart of the city—a consequence of the construction of the underground railway connection between Brussels South and Brussels North— was at the time an open-air parking lot with a gas station. Culot & Co. proposed to fill in the area with small- scale housing blocks, glued together with trees and furniture that seemed to originate in the



Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaines, Carrefour de l'Europe, Brussels, 1976.
Archives ArAU, Brussels.



nineteenth century. The architecture, meanwhile, was openly historicist too—articulated facades with colonnades and columns; gabled roofs; small windows—suggesting both a historically accurate and democratically eclectic design process. It would lead, in 1984, to the approval of a final development plan by the Brussels city council, based on a small-scale reconstruction of historical sections and building lines. ArAU seemed to have reached its objective: modernist office slabs had been avoided. The pseudo-neo-Flemish-Renaissance architecture that would be built during the 1990s did not contain new houses for the inhabitants of Brussels, unfortunately, but included ridiculously picturesque hotels for tourists.[5]

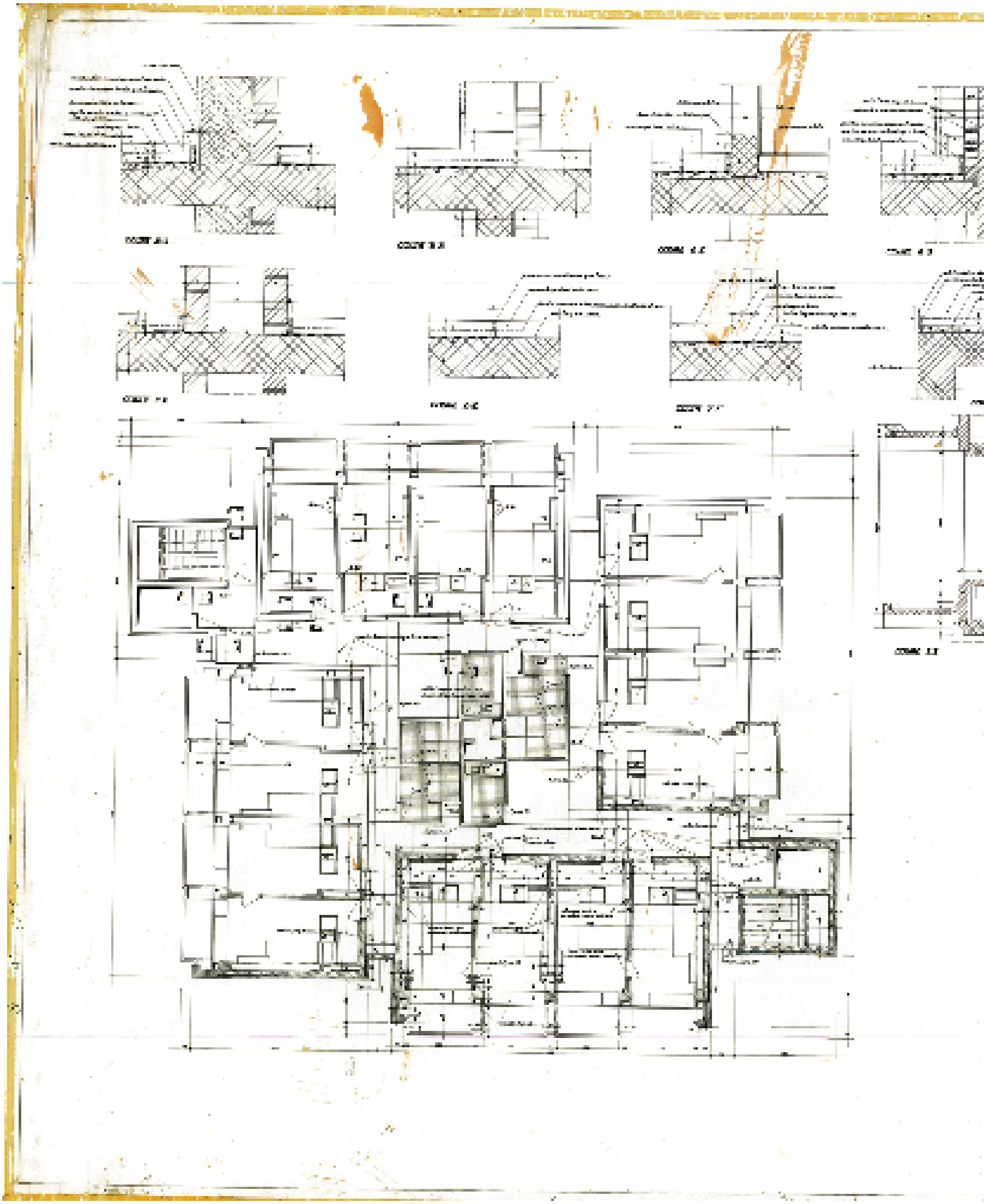
Krier seems to have foreseen the possibility of that sad outcome as a major problem in the approach taken by Culot, for whom the position of the architect-as-author was, in the end, subordinate to social issues and participation. In May 1976, Culot had, in a somewhat bitter article, suggested that formal preferences in architecture hardly made sense, as long as modernist monotony was avoided: “it must be admitted that socialist aesthetics can only be eclectic.”[6] Reacting in an open letter in December of the same year, Krier objected against that nearly total relativity: “If you say that one has to give ‘the people’ what they want . . . that reduces your ‘people’ again to the role of (perhaps happy) consumers. . . . That attitude is, I think, dangerous, because it falls back into the use of a thin cultural facade which could very well have the same paternalistic origin as the eclecticism of the nineteenth century, and which also persists in the stylistic orgies of the Stalinist era.”[7] Disagreements about style were soon settled, however, and their collaboration took off. Culot found in Krier a provocative theoretician of his own activist approach, but also an architect with strong convictions and with a talent for drawing—from now on, all the proposals of ArAU would look as if they could have been devised by Krier. He, in turn, found in Culot an impresario, working from the heart of Europe, who was able to disseminate his convictions and preferences in drawings, projects, publications, manifestations, and exhibitions. By 1978 they had found a common voice, clearly audible in the essay “The Only Path for Architecture,” published in AAM’s journal in the spring and translated, a few months later, in Oppositions.[8] The solution for many, if not all, problems in modern society was, Culot and Krier argued, a return to architecture as it was professed before the Industrial

Revolution: based on handicrafts, without any experimentation or innovation, resulting in streets and squares, and imitating the “ideal” state of the “classic” European city. The problem with this reasoning, as Joan Ockman argued a few years later in the same American journal, is that it is based on a generalization of both architecture and society: there has never been any such thing as a totally reprehensible architectural modernism, to be blamed for the modernization of society in general—a process that has also resulted in at least a few improvements, one would think. And conversely, it is arrogant, as architects, to think that returning to preindustrial architecture would make a difference if the rest of society remained the same— or rather, continued to change.9 If architecture is indeed the head of the monster, then the monster would survive its decapitation.

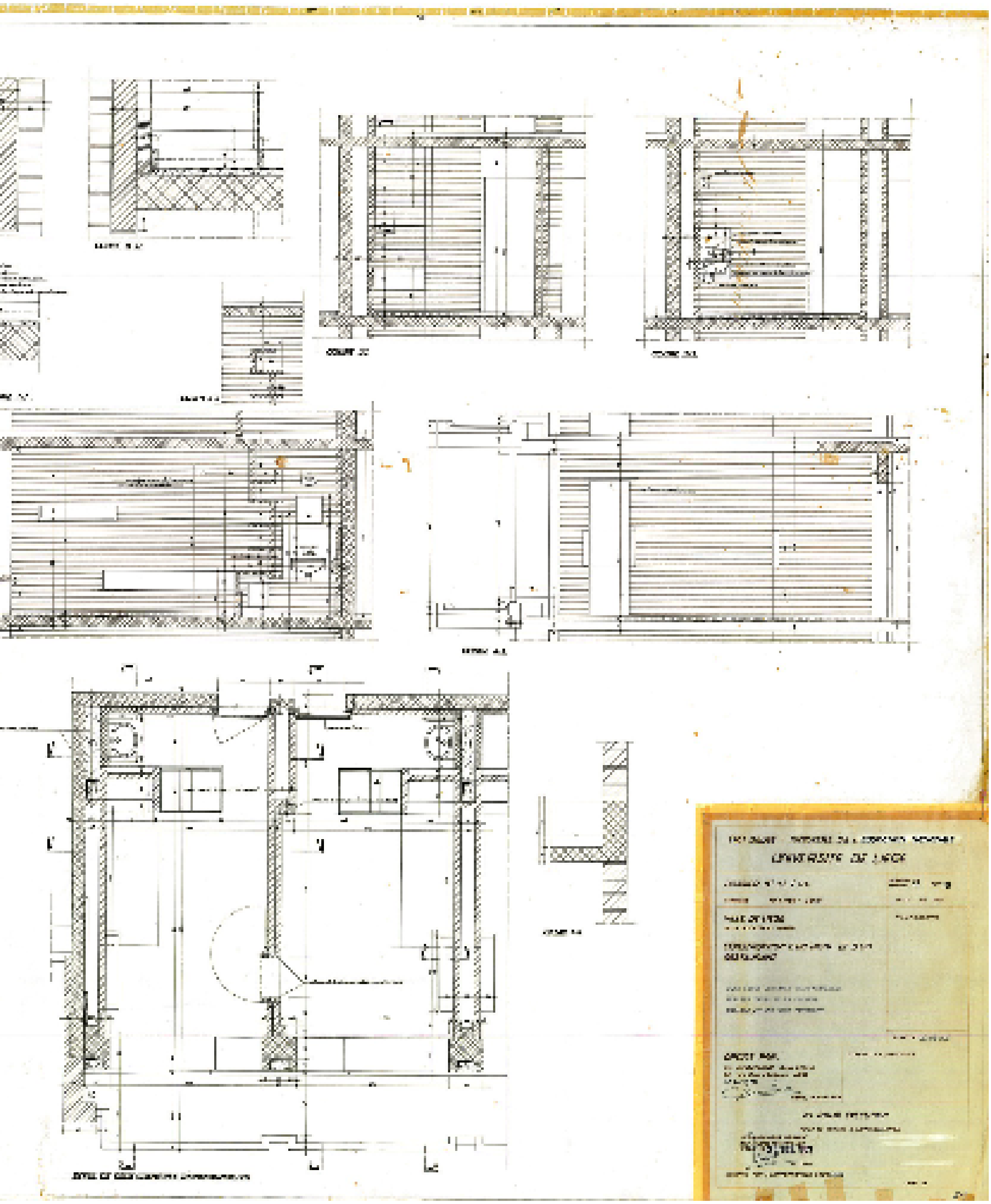
All those contradictions notwithstanding, Krier and Culot tried to attract a following. Also in 1978, Rational Architecture was published, again by AAM, as an attempt to conflate the wider phenomenon of (neo)rationalism with the “reconstruction” of the European city, bringing together such diverse architects as Ricardo Bofill, Manuel de Solà- Morales, Aldo Rossi, and Rem Koolhaas, interspersed with projects from ArAU.10 In addition, from November 15 to 18, 1978, an international colloquium entitled “The Reconstruction of the European City” was organized by Culot and Krier in Brussels, leading to the publication, in 1980, of The Declaration of Brussels, intended as a replacement of the Athens Charter. That most architects present at the meeting in 1978 could not resign themselves to the prospect of forever imitating classical models is apparent from an article that Jacques Lucan published in December, as a response to the round tables in Brussels. Defining every possible project as a repetition of a predetermined process, he argued, reduces architecture to a quest for adequacy, regularity, and harmony. For that very reason, as an approach, it would lead to the total opposite of urbanity—defined as vividness, unpredictability, and dissensus.11 That kind of love for the endangered European city would smother it. It’s likely that Krier and Culot agreed. They decided, at any rate, that their love had to remain platonic and pure. In a book from 1980 collecting the drawings of his ally, Culot commented on Krier’s withdrawal from building. In a text entitled “We Will No Longer Build”—sounding like both an exhortation and the royal plural—he wrote: “The resistance to which Léon Krier is urging us, is above all a condition of refusal which finds its immediate expression in a project for the city. The reconstruction of the European city has no perspective outside this condition of refusal."12 A few pages further in the same book, Krier confessed: "It was Maurice Culot who convinced me that a responsible architect cannot build today. All that involvement in fragmentary battles to build this or that is not only useless, it distracts from the most urgent work—the reconstruction of a global theory."13 In another AAM book from the productive year 1980—a reedition of Quatremère de Quincy's Essai sur la nature, le but et les moyens de l'imitation dans les beaux-arts from 1823—Krier reiterated his belief that architecture could only survive as a form of thinking, in which the human spirit could find solace and satisfaction: "At the twilight of the machine age, the fields of theory might as well remain the last horizon of the pleasures of the mind."14

Krier and Culot were part of the generation born before or just after the Second World War, who witnessed, in the postwar period, the widening gap between architecture and an affluent society whose choices and values they considered increasingly questionable. Their contemporaries largely agreed with the analysis the duo started from. But instead of accepting their refusal, others went in search of a theory that, despite everything, could be reconciled with praxis, shedding the lure of cultural pessimism, while keeping alive, dialectically and by means of real buildings, the possibility of a different future for architecture, society, and their troubled but inevitable relationship. One of those architects was Charles Vandenhove, who wrote or published very few articles and rarely gave lectures or interviews. It seems as if he had determined, after self-examination and consultation, his position by the end of the 1960s, and saw no need for further comments. In 1969, he organized in Liège a symposium entitled "The Architect No Longer Has An Audience: What Is the Future of the Built Environment?," in which very diverse figures participated, such as Bruce Goff, Lucius Burckhardt, and Giancarlo de Carlo. One year before, in 1968, Vandenhove had expressed his doubts—and his own outlook on the end of architecture—in an interview published in the French periodical Cimaise, with an aphorism: "There is no more architecture since there are architects."15 It is not hard to understand what he meant: in a process that had started in the Renaissance, and that truly got going following the Second World War, architecture lost its self-evidence and its power to represent society; the fragmentation and individualization of the latter undermined *the fundaments of the former. In 1967, Vandenhove had already hinted at what he considered to be a worthy strategy, by falling back on a definition of architecture from French architect Pierre Vago, editor of L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui: "If he does not want to abdicate, the architect must not only recognize, but loudly proclaim the artistic character of architecture, the primacy of form, not at the expense of the satisfaction of functional requirements, of constructive logic, laws of technology and economy, but as specific elements, without which there is no architecture."16 Composing with separate and often prefabricated elements, yet constructing buildings that form a meaningful whole—it is what Vandenhove tried to do, and the result was, at its most extreme, a glorification of architecture as an autonomous yet subservient discipline, without becoming a solipsistic end in itself. The excesses of a too explicit, overly complicated, or mannerist formalism were avoided in most of his projects. Vandenhove stubbornly believed in vocabulary and grammar: buildings consisting of doors, walls, columns, stairs, plinths, beams, and windows, industrially produced, and placed in an ordered and mostly symmetrical composition. It's a conviction that became manifest in one of his early works, built between 1962 and 1967: Résidence Brull, a tower, forty- five meters high, with one hundred rooms for students along the Meuse river in Liège. The typical plan, organized as a swastika, has a square form: four times four identical rooms next to each other in mirrored pairs, with a surface area of 13.5 square meters, accommodating a bed, desk, wardrobe, and sink, and with a balcony of 3 square meters. A functional block in the middle of each floor contains two times two toilets and two showers, and two kitchens. In two opposite corners of the plan a circulation tube is added. The building is made of brick and concrete, and both materials remain visible.*

Vandenhove's paradoxical awareness of being an architect in a society without architecture, as well as his reliance on formally predefined architectonic elements, can be reminiscent of the way Roland Barthes theorized postwar literature in his book from 1953, Le Degré zéro de l'écriture— more than ten years before the semiological crisis in architecture, as usual a little slower than other cultural expressions. Barthes, too, wrote about a "writer without Literature" who affirmed "the existence of a formal reality independent of language and style."17 Le Degré zéro de l'écriture is a book about formal strategies for producing literature, and by extension art



Charles Vandenhove, Résidence Brull, Liège, 1963, plan. Fondation Charles Vandenhove.



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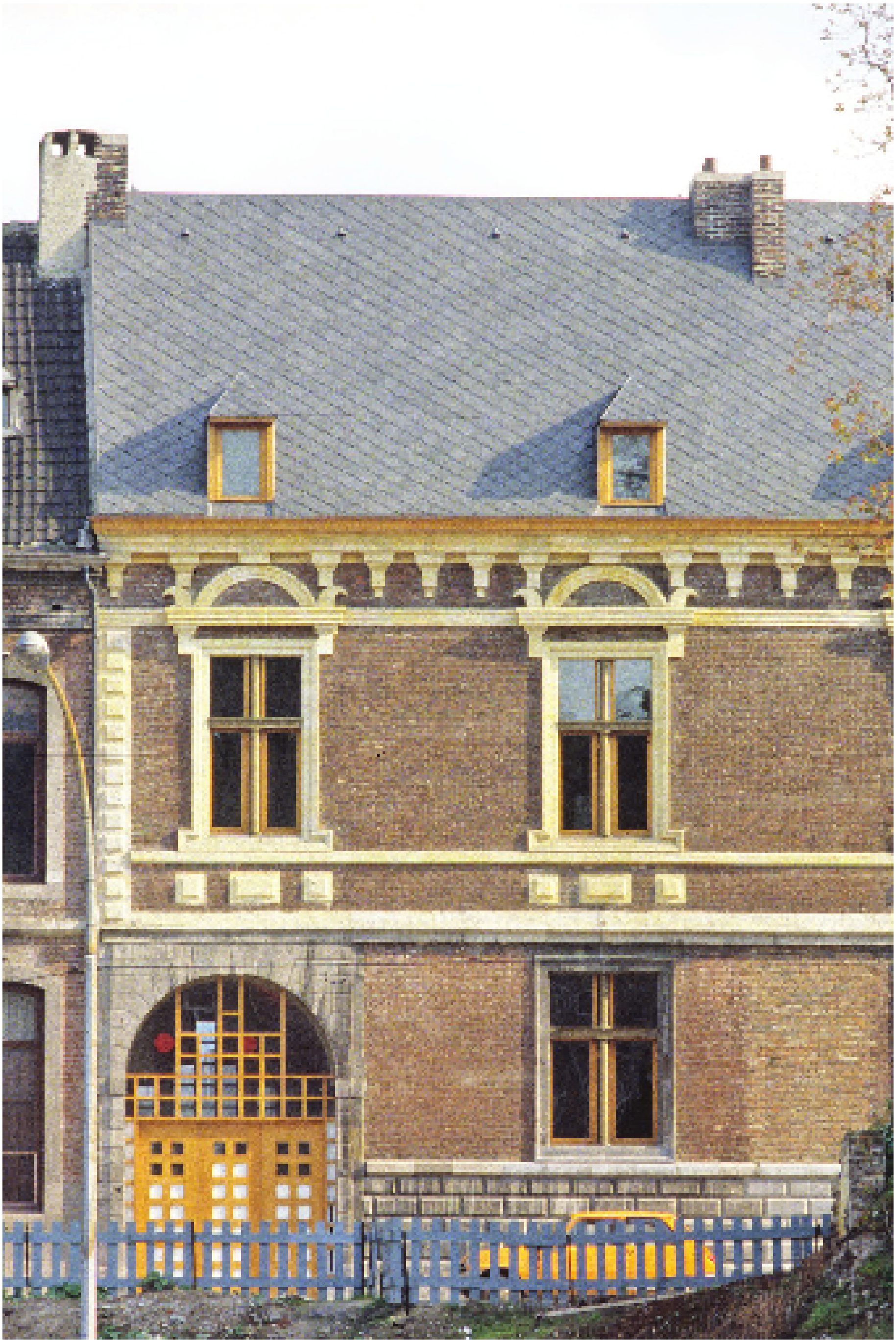
and architecture, in a world that couldn't care less, and that has no intention of acting on that production by changing its course. It is no coincidence that Barthes's terminology shines through in the best-known text from the 1970s dealing with the problem of architecture's role in postwar Western society: Manfredo Tafuri's "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language" from 1974. "Today," Tafuri wrote famously (and dramatically), "he who wishes to make architecture speak is thus forced to resort to materials devoid of all meaning; he is forced to reduce to degree zero every ideology, every dream of social function, every utopian residue."[18] Vandenhove's implicit position— as an exponent for contemporary architecture in general— was based on the premise that things aren't that bad, or needn't be.

There is little to argue with what Tafuri wrote, but does that also mean that architects should quit because architecture no longer makes sense? Barthes, at least, could offer a way out, by suggesting that the "third dimension of Form equally, and not without an additional tragic implication, binds the writer to his society."[19] Even more so (and with a slightly sophistic inversion): capitalism keeps rumbling on, and isn't that the main reason for architecture's existence, in order to be able, after all, to make small, conscious, and precisely articulated exceptions? Agreed, there is no more architecture since there are architects, and yes, the art of building has reached some kind of end— but couldn't it also be that architecture, like literature, in Barthes's phrasing, "is like phosphorus: it shines with its maximum brilliance at the moment when it attempts to die"?[20] As if by magical coincidence, Charles Vandenhove discovered a similar sentence in the Hôtel Torrentius, a sixteenth-century townhouse in Liège designed by Lambert Lombard, which he saved from destruction by renovating it between 1978 and 1981 and furnishing it as his home and office.

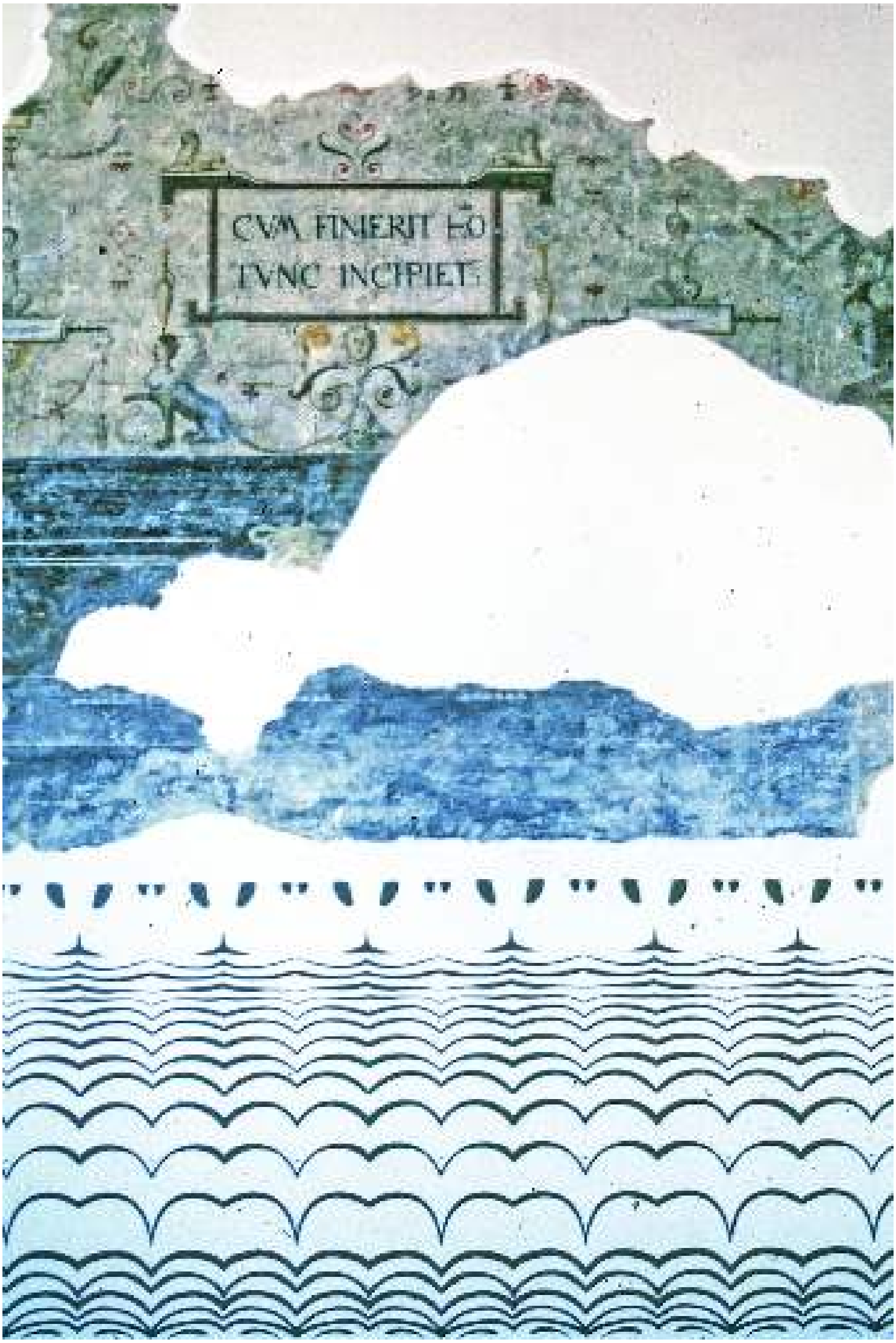
On one of the walls, a Latin inscription is engraved in capitals, from the eighteenth chapter of the Book of Sirach, "Cum finierit ho[mo] tunc incipiet," watched over, bottom right, by a sphinx. The riddle it presents can be translated as: "When man thinks he's finished, he's only at the beginning." Vandenhove preserved this aphorism and invited French abstract painter Olivier Debré to add a wall painting underneath, as a kind of paneling making visible the tidal radiations of history.

Of course, this sort of juggling with endings and beginnings is deeply ironic, not in a funny or cynical way, but almost mystically *so, and depending on one's point of view, it expresses intellectual strength and asceticism, or withdrawal and an "exaltation of apartness" (to borrow terms from another text by Tafuri from the 1970s).21 Other options have been explored. To wash away every possible tragic implication of architecture's difficulties in finding an audience, and to aim without detours or restraint for social impact, recognition, and approval, is what another Belgian architect from this period tried to achieve. Where Krier and Culot deemed architecture only possible on paper and in theory, and while Vandenhove tried to affirm architecture as meaningful, exceptional, and functional all at the same time, Lucien Kroll chose an architecture in which the role of the architect seems to evaporate, thanks to the direct implication and participation of the inhabitants. Remarkably, Vandenhove and Kroll collaborated for a while, from 1951 to 1957, after studying together in Liège and Brussels. In a conversation with Rem Koolhaas in 2012, Kroll commented upon that professional alliance: "I thought that two persons with so diametrically opposed opinions would create complexity together. But they create conflicts. So we separated peacefully. [Vandenhove] is the most intelligent architect that I know, but he is impossible to work with."22 Kroll also built housing for students— the most symbolic population group at the time— in the decade following the split with Vandenhove, but the result was something completely different. He believed architects must work intensely with residents and clients to put aside the traditional and oppressive power of architecture, as well as the power of institutions and the building industry. Reasoned but artful compositions based on identical, prefabricated elements such as those made by Vandenhove were out of the question. In December 1969, Kroll was asked to design the medical faculty of the new French-speaking Université Catholique de Louvain in Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, on the eastern outskirts of Brussels.*

The project was soon nicknamed La Mémé (Maison Médicale), and it became one of the more famous buildings from the 1970s, "on a scale," according to Deyan Sudjic's slightly exaggerated suggestion, "with Gaudí's cathedral in Barcelona or Utzon's Sydney Opera House."23 Initially supported by the university, and assisted by a psychologist, Kroll organized workshops with the students, and with scissors and paint a polyester model was produced. La Mémé came about in an intentionally chaotic fashion, as each student was allowed to express particular dwelling desires, albeit



Charles Vandenhove, Hôtel Torrentius, Liège, 1981, exterior. Archives Geert Bekaert, Ghent University.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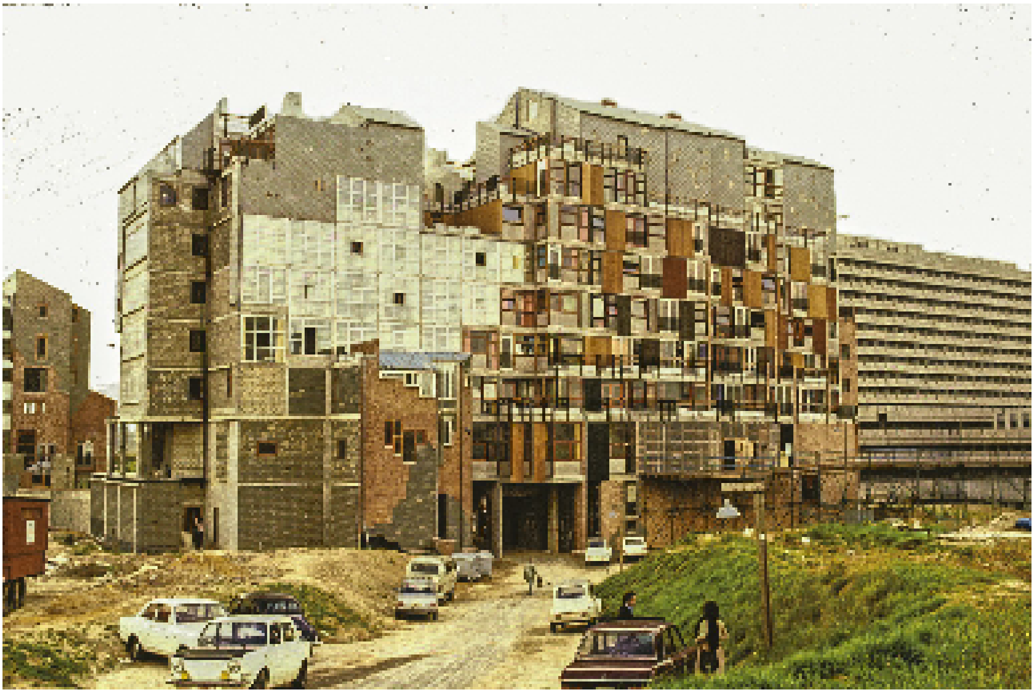
Charles Vandenhove, Hôtel Torrentius, Liège, wall painting by Olivier Debré, 1981.
Archives Geert Bekaert, Ghent University.



Lucien Kroll, Medical Faculty Housing, Sint-Lambrechts- Woluwe, 1976. Archives Geert Bekaert, Ghent University.

temporarily, since the rooms were separated by movable wooden walls. A tall American student, for example, built a room seven meters high. If students wanted "normal" rooms with standard dimensions, this was possible, but these rooms were grouped together and labeled as "the fascists." Only student couples got a balcony. (That students were married was not exceptional: Vandenhove's student housing in Liège also included twenty small flats for couples, twice the size of the single rooms, but in Rési dence Brull, every unit was provided with an outdoor space.) Spontaneity was granted by Kroll not only to the residents but also to the workers, who are reported to have decorated fresh concrete with the imprints of branches and leaves, all of their own accord, to make the building more human. Geert Bekaert, one of the fiercest critics of La Mémé, witnessed how the architect himself, prior to a press tour, instructed the workers to apply this supposedly humanizing ornament, which strengthened his conviction that in Kroll's architecture, "the honored anarchy is simply simulated."24

Notwithstanding the contested nature of its genesis, La Mémé is impossible to describe, as it literally and intentionally consists of incidents, both in floor plan, in facade, and in materialization. Looking back on the project, Kroll described his convictions: "Repetition is a crime! Industrialized manufacturing can only be tolerated when it does not reduce the number of elements used, when it accepts all exceptions to its rules, and when it does not determine the form and texture of the architecture. For example, for the windows, we chose every available size and material; the structures are very heterogeneous."25 Sudjic called the result "an oasis of individualism and character within a bleak and sterile environment," consisting of the nearby hospital— a heavy, concrete slab—and the rest of the campus.26 Kroll tried to solve architecture's crisis of legitimacy by seemingly effacing himself for the benefit of each and every one of the residents, identifying "traditional" architecture with the established, elitist order, and siding with "the people" by giving them what they wanted. As in every position with populist undertones, the outcome can be paradoxical: the fact that people, no matter how different, could basically want the same thing was not taken into account. Moreover, being the organizer of participatory workshops is the most efficient and yet hidden way to exercise power. And finally, deliberately chaotic architecture does not step back obligingly and humbly— if it does desire to become a structured and subservient support for human life, a lot of effort is put into hiding that intention. This is, in other words, demanding architecture, which shows the kind of mannerism the fragmentation of functionalism can lead to. In the end, the individualism that Kroll's buildings exhibited reinforced the aura of the architect as both charismatic conductor and formal innovator, while it also anticipated or announced a future society (and illustrated the ideology of a country) in which what was taboo was not individuality but, on the contrary, collectivity. If there is something that La Mémé shows unambiguously, it's mainly how deep the crisis was at the time, and how far architects went, or thought they had to go, to shake off all that was bad about architecture.

This concise history of the struggles of architects during the 1960s and 1970s— of Culot, Krier, Vandenhove, and Kroll, as they tried to redefine, celebrate, mourn, declare, or postpone the ends of architecture— was resumed in more general terms by Ada Louise Huxtable in a 1971 article in the New York Times:

> The point is that we are in the midst of an extremely important shift in the perception and consideration of the critical relationships between a building and its surroundings and the people who use it or are affected by it, with emphasis on effect. . . . What counts overwhelmingly today are the multiple ways any building serves a very complex and sophisticated set of environmental needs. . . . Like every profession, architecture is indulging in considerable soul searching and self- flagellation with social issues. It is groping toward a redetermination of purpose and practice in a revolutionary period that has left conventional practice behind because it provides no answers— or the wrong answers— to environmental questions.[27]

Huxtable's sentences could have been written today, and they show how much has remained unchanged in terms of architecture's problematic position within society. At the same time, it's not surprising that in our age, when the constant emphasis on individual responsibility needs to compensate for the difficulty of collective action, the conscience of the architect has not become clearer, and the reasons to stop building have become more numerous. The field of architecture's complicity, in other words, has expanded, because of the persistent and successful unveiling of the political, social, racial, and— above all— ecological unconscious of the discipline. At the same time, the world doesn’t really seem to have evolved for the better, something a never-ending stream of news, images, disclosures, accusations, and revelations reminds us of whenever we decide to be online, and to be updated. One of the synthesizing texts in this regard was published in 2022: “Toward a Political Ecology of Architecture,” by Joan Ockman. The more recent criticality in architecture, instigated by ever more “soul searching and self-flagellation,” no longer aims to discuss or dismantle the formal and intellectual decisions architects make when drawing and designing buildings. Rather, it targets the construction methods, the supply of materials, and the labor on the construction site. As a result of this “material turn”— eclipsing the still quite recent social, linguistic, phenomenological, digital, or political turns—the proof of the pudding is not so much in the eating, but in the cooking that precedes it, in the origins of the ingredients, and in the working conditions of the kitchen staff. When the architect takes responsibility for all those issues, it would lead, as Ockman writes, to the following questions and suggestions: “How can buildings be designed so as to make ‘explicit and intelligible’ the complexities and contingencies of their own coming into being? How can buildings make these conditions transparent in their physical form? . . . In short, how can architecture be made to reflect and represent its process of materialization? . . . To recollect, within the project itself, architecture’s initial formlessness and the multiple, separated sites of its construction is what I propose to call the political ecology of architecture.”[28] Architecture in Belgium from the past decade shows, among other things, how difficult it is to do justice to that proposal, because it implies, presupposes, or hopes for an abolition of the division of labor, by expanding the architect’s range of tasks. Much can be said against the abstraction, the alienation, the inequity, and the repetitive dullness that this division causes, but that does not mean that everyone, simply by willpower, can engage in all the facets of a complicated production process, and therefore in all kinds of very varied but also very intricate activities. To return to the gastronomic metaphor: for a cook, it’s quite a lot of extra work— and a different kind of work too— to not only prepare a meal, but also to cultivate vegetables, to bespeak clean energy and tools for the kitchen, and to ensure the well-being of everyone involved in the long production chain of a meal, especially when some hardcore gourmets are eagerly waiting in the restaurant, expecting, full of impatience, the usual quality. Similarly, for an architect to take into account—to study, to prepare, and to “design”—the totality of the process of materializing a building, twenty-four hours in one day probably won’t suffice. Paradoxically, perhaps, the expanded field of architecture’s complicity, accompanied by the desire to jettison the division of labor, has led to more fragmentation, more division, more specialization, and more outsourcing, and thus to a reinforcement of that division.

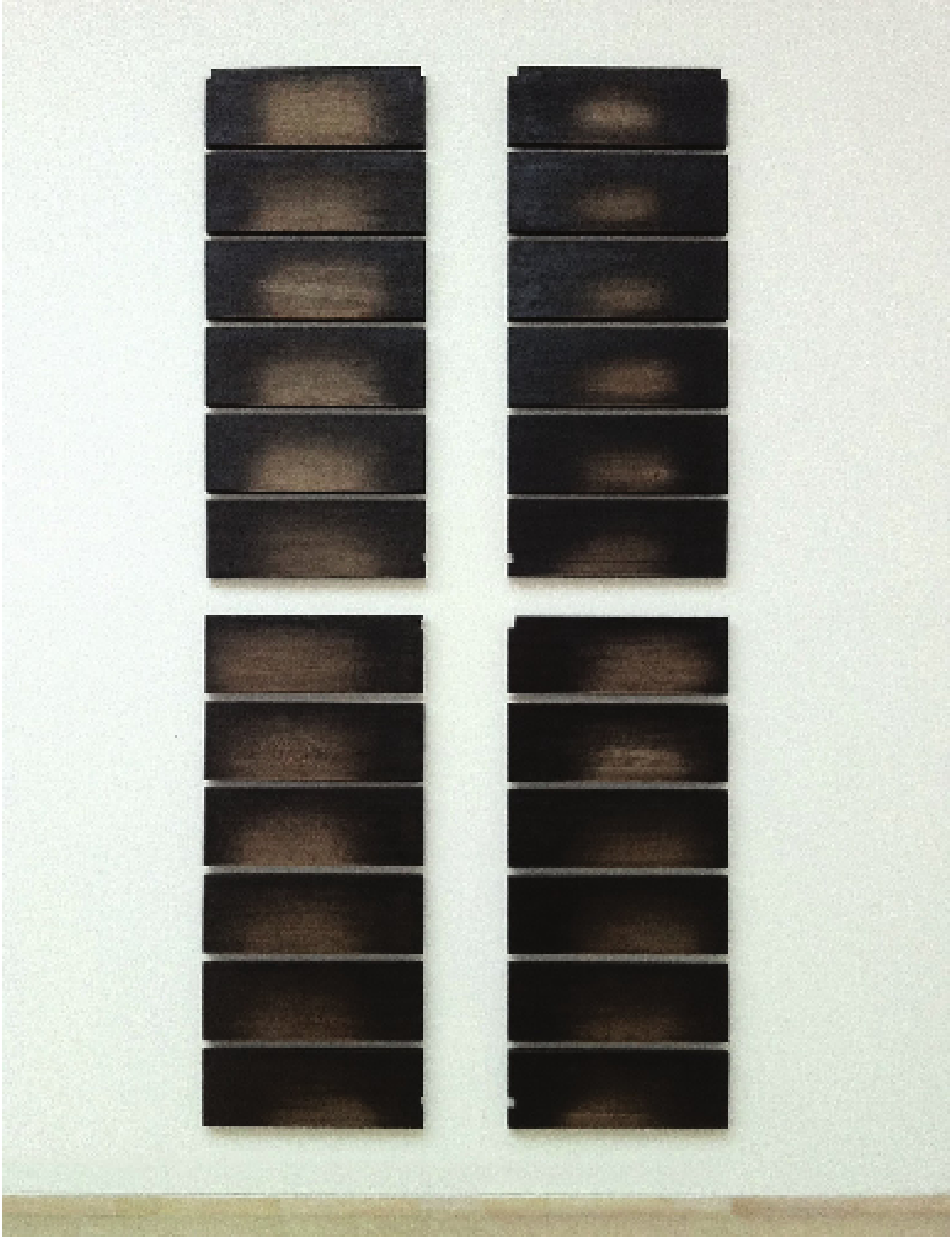
This is visible, for example, in the fact that reusing discarded building materials in new constructions— one of the more direct ways to respect architecture’s political ecology— has become, for some offices, an area of expertise and a form of distinction. The Brussels- based practice Rotor is a case in point. In 2010, they emerged on the international scene with the exhibition Usus/ Usure— Latin for Use/Wear— in the Belgian pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale. Mounted on the walls were a series of time-worn fragments— carpets, banisters, floor and wall panels, tiles, and skirting boards, gleaned from the demolition sites of mostly public buildings.

Through an artistic presentation reminiscent of the way minimalist sculptors like Carl Andre showcased materials, Usus/Usure was an invitation to reconsider the beauty of architectural remnants that would normally be thrown away or, at best, recycled. Rotor’s démarche, as Richard Ingersoll argued in a review, gave “a new vitality” to John Ruskin’s position regarding preservation, because he “railed against making changes that erase a building’s patina.”29 By celebrating the aesthetics which such a patina can accompany, Rotor also refuted, in an almost invisibly polemical way, the cliché that an ecological way of building has to be ugly by definition, or that reuse can’t meet the refined taste judgments of the average visitor to a biennale—ecology and aesthetics needn’t be mutually exclusive. And yet Usus/Usure also showed the impotence of architects who are, first of all, unable to take over the work of “that mighty sculptor, Time,” to quote the title of an essay by Marguerite Yourcenar.30 Reuse is equally subject to the decoupling of theory and practice: the aura of everything that is old cannot be designed, while materials that do wear such a kind of historicity are not just there for the taking, as strange as that may sound after almost two hundred years of industrial production and continuous construction activities. This became clear in, among other effects, an offshoot of Usus/Usures: the website Opalis, on which

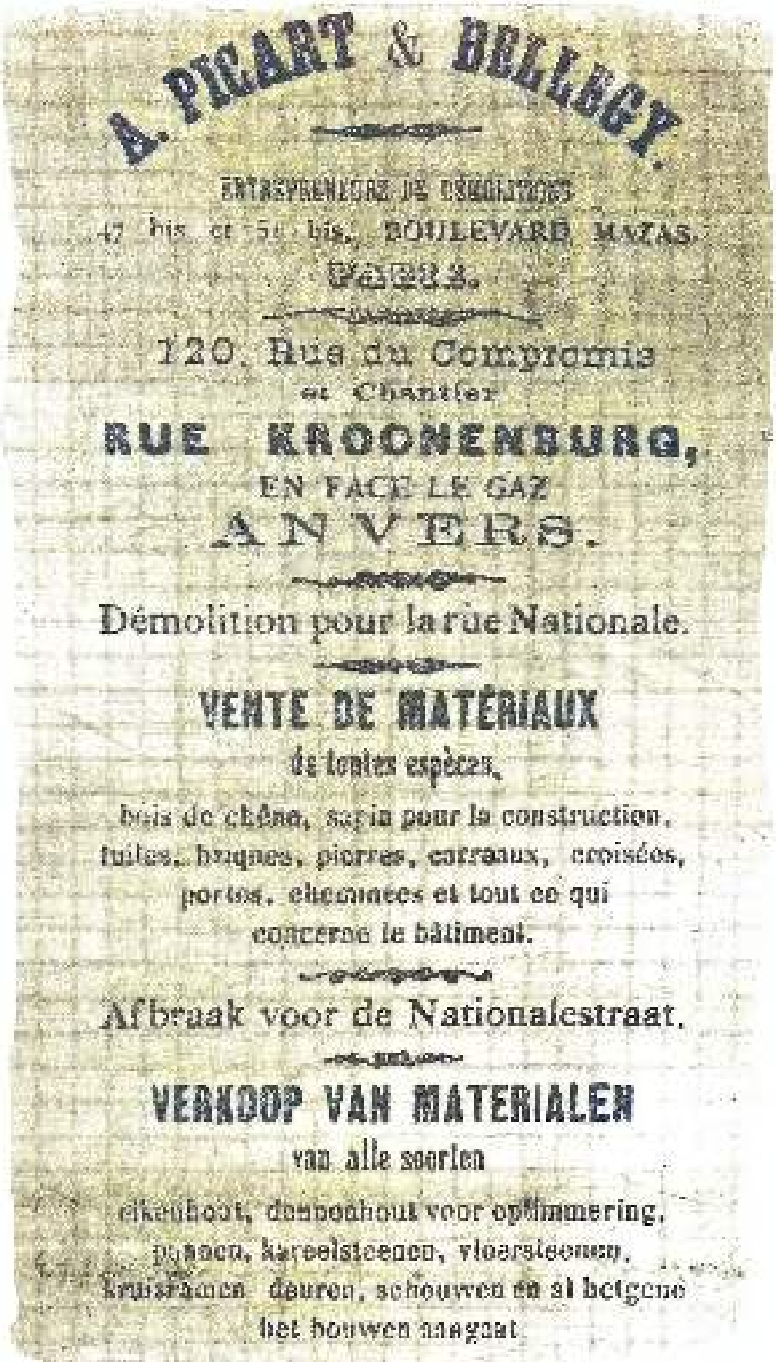
Rotor has offered, since 2012, an overview of Belgian (and more recently also European) dealers in used building materials. The need for such a platform shows how the construction industry, on which the largest part of architecture remains dependent, is not attuned yet to offering what emerges after old buildings have been deconstructed instead of destroyed, not least because it is not easy to break down a building in such a way that its elements can be reused, while often— confronted with mixtures of plaster, glue, fibers, and foam plastic— reuse is not possible at all. In fact, as of 2020, only 1 percent of construction materials are being reemployed in new projects following their initial application, as recent research by Rotor has indicated, while the mass of construction waste produced in Belgium has more than doubled over the last twenty years.[31] Reuse— consisting of careful dismantling, cleaning, storage, and reimplementation— requires energy too, but it's a kind of energy that has to come from prudent human beings, rather than from resolute machines. In the end, it's often cheaper to order new materials.

Repurposing building materials rather than throwing them away became standard practice only during the twentieth century. In the history of Belgian architecture, examples of reuse can be found, although they have yet to become canonical, if they have already come to light. A study by Lut Prims and Ronny De Meyer has shown that in Antwerp during the final quarter of the nineteenth century, a group of so-called entrepreneurs de démolitions was active, originating from Paris. As their letterhead indicated, A. Picart & Bellegy organized the "sale of materials of all kinds: oak wood, pine wood for carpentry, tiles, flooring, paving stones, cross windows, doors, fireplaces, and everything else related to building."[32] According to one source, also "abundant demolition material from medieval Paris was processed, dragged to the station of Antwerp in endless trainloads."[33]

Many buildings in the southern part of Antwerp were built with remnants from expropriated and demolished houses, and then concealed behind a neoclassical plaster facade. Even today, oak beams from the sixteenth century can be found in terraced houses dating from the nineteenth century. Picart & Bellegy sold beams and bricks, but they also realized houses themselves, as prototypes proving that it was possible to work with scrap material. For the Société Anonyme du Sud d'Anvers— a real estate company that, with the support of the city and King Leopold II, wanted to



Rotor, Usus/Usure, Venice Architecture Biennale, 2010. Photograph by Eric Mairiaux.



A. PICART & BELLEGY.

ENTREPRENEURS DE DÉMOLITIONS
47 bis et 51 bis, BOULEVARD MAZAS
PARIS.

120, Rue du Compromis
et Chantier
RUE KROONENBURG,
EN FACE LE GAZ
ANVERS.

Démolition pour la rue Nationale.

VENTE DE MATÉRIAUX
de toutes espèces,
bois de chêne, sapin pour la construction,
tuiles, briques, pierres, carreaux, croisées,
portes, cheminées et tout ce qui
concerne le bâtiment.

Afbraak voor de Nationalestraat.

VERKOOP VAN MATERIALEN
van alle soorten
eikenhout, dennenhout voor optimmering,
pannen, kareelsteenen, vloersteenen,
kruisramen deuren, schouwen en al hetgene
het bouwen aangaat.

A. Picart & Bellegy, letterhead, 1880. City Archives Antwerp.

"upgrade" this part of Antwerp by turning it into a monumental, bourgeois, and profitable district—it didn't matter how houses were constructed, as long as building continued.

What is even harder to find are historical examples not of the reusing but the recycling of building waste. Here, the theoretical advantage is that any existing building material can be ground and processed, and it is also possible to use remnants that do not originate from the construction industry. Another plus is that new building elements can be produced and shaped according to needs or preferences: they don't have to be searched for, preexisting in an obsolete building. In the energy- intensive process of recycling, however, a lot of historical, cultural, and economic value gets lost, just like paper that has been recycled and that is often recognizable as such. And yet the opposite of recycling also exists: upcycling, which means reusing discarded objects or materials to create a product of higher quality or value than the original. This is what another Belgian office, bC (short for Brussels Cooperation), has been doing. By making, for example, dry cured bricks out of bits of broken concrete and glass, or by constructing walls with only two materials (such as structural earth blocks and a hemp- lime insulation on a wooden framework), they have created buildings that Pauline Lefebvre has given the epitheton ornans of "hairy."34 It's an adjective that was used in architectural discourse already in 2001, when Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till were writing about their own house, known as 9– 10 Stock Orchard Street in London.35 Hairy architecture aims for a different aesthetics: not clean, smooth, or truthful, but composite, textured, tactile, uncertain, ordinary, structurally compromised, dirty, and often poorly detailed. It's an aesthetic that wants to be an ethic too: in contrast to the concrete that was so important to brutalism (and that also wanted to be tactile, untidy, and rugged), the materials used now are beautiful and good because they are circular, locally sourced, renewable, nonindustrial, and nonpolluting. Although no fuel is necessary, recycling and upcycling, just like reusing, do of course require human energy. And that too becomes an ingredient of its ethics and aesthetics: bC wants to design buildings that lead to a construction process in which local workers play a crucial part, and in which other people—residents, users, interested parties, or students— can become involved, to such an extent that, with a Latourian term, all the different "actors" become identical and interchangeable, intertwined like messy strands in a clot, which is another reason to use the label "hairy." It is not a coincidence that many of the images illustrating their projects show people making, preparing, and constructing the building, prior to its completion.

When bC was invited to contribute to the main exhibition at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018—Freespace, curated by Yvonne Farrell and Shelley McNamara— they produced an installation with a set of devices, tools, and materials that enabled the construction of four projects. The Terstaram press, for example, is a machine to manually produce compressed earth blocks; the pneumatic rammer is a tool from the steel industry that can be used for ramming earth; masonry arches can be constructed by means of wooden formwork, which is also fit to compress a layer of hempcrete; for moving 19,000 earth blocks, compressed on a building site, grabbers were used to carry two blocks at a time, one per hand, across an average distance of eleven meters between the production and storage sites.[36] In what can be considered an homage, or perhaps as another instance of re- or upcycling, the title of bC's installation—The Act of Building— might be interpreted as a nod to an article from 1990 by Lucien Kroll, the Belgian pioneer of participation and political ecology, entitled "For the Demilitarization of the Act of Building." Although bC, contrary to Kroll, opts for a method in which regular composition is possible, they similarly try to avoid the way that "during construction, in the atelier or at the site, no one is being asked to understand or to identify himself with the object that is being built."[37]

One of the paradoxes of paying that much attention to the building process rather than to the built object is that the latter, in spite of everything (and together with its many elements and tools), becomes fetishized again, because it is believed to have special or supernatural powers, precisely thanks to the laborious way in which it is created. That is not a bad thing, and it is hard to avoid doing so in the production of architecture or culture. But the question is, ultimately, for whom this kind of architecture is made, when so much of its story and representations deal not with the users or the residents, but with the producers and the architects. The soul searching of the discipline, in Huxtable's terms, or the attention to its political ecology, as Ockman described it, can cause the function of architecture— its banal use in the daily life of a society—to be suppressed, or rather to be redefined. The true subject matter of these kinds of projects is not, in the end, the

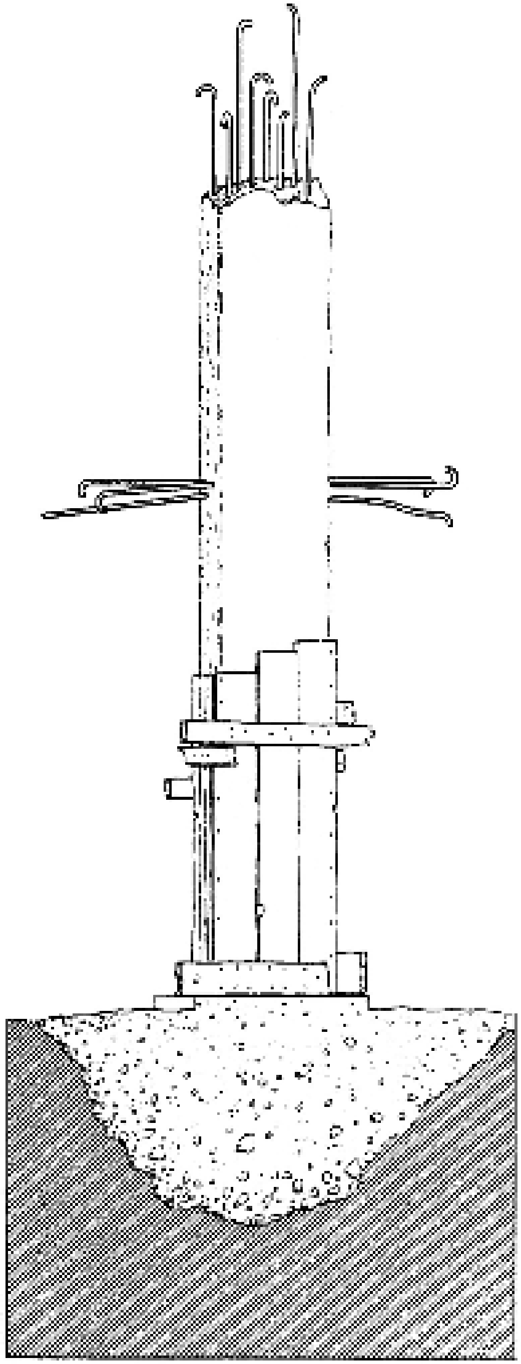
bC architects & studies & materials, the Ceb Production Chain, Edegem, Regional House, Belgium, 2017.

organization of life, but rather the organization of labor—which is perhaps appropriate for an era in which working is all that people seem to do.

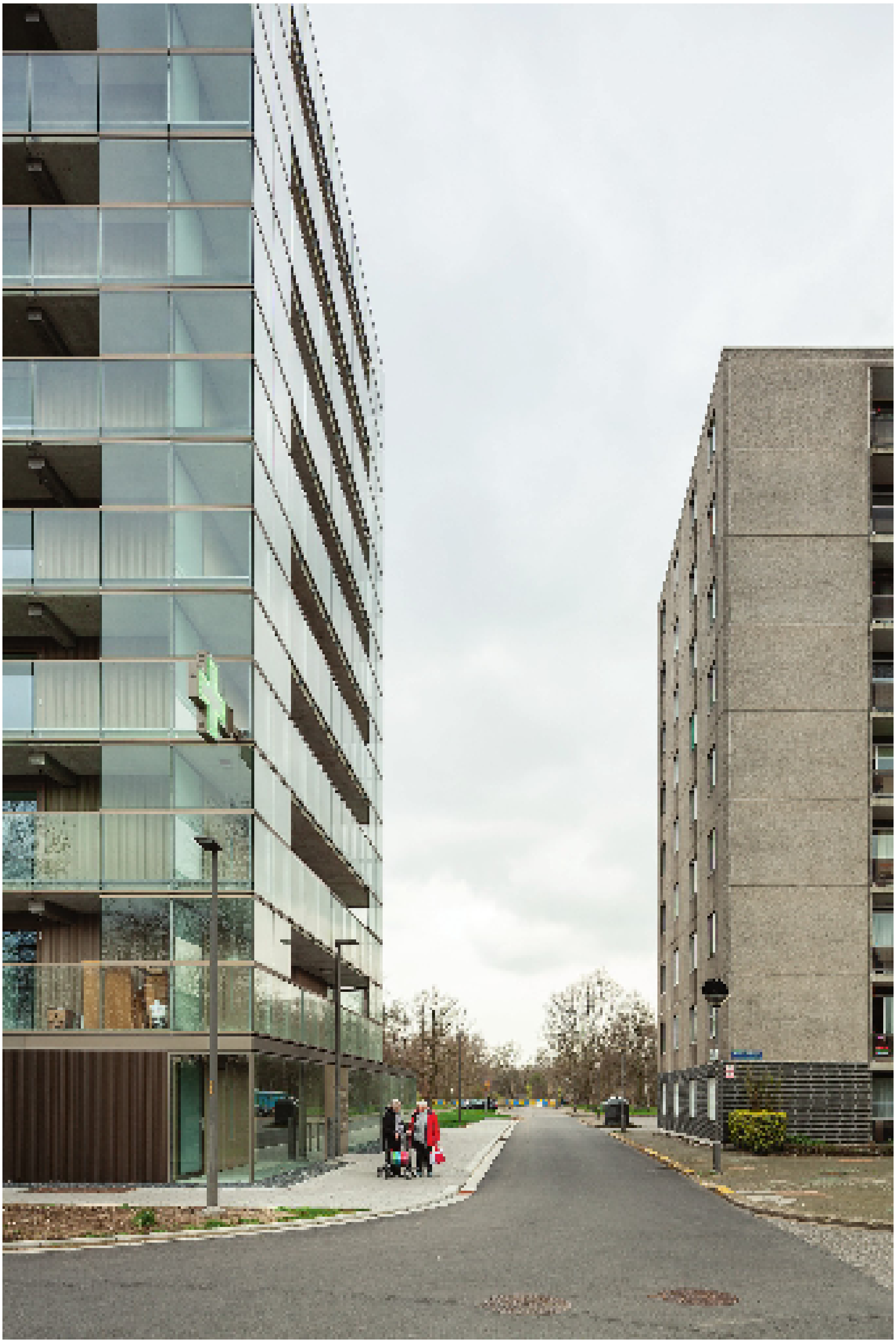
Rotor's reuse and bC's recycling have this in common: instead of relying on "normal" energy, they fall back—as much as possible—on good old human energy to do the work that makes buildings stand. Human beings, after all, emit less carbon dioxide than machines, even when working up a sweat. The intention to build while emitting as little CO_2 as possible is thus an attempt to minimize the nature of architecture as a "carbon form."[38] That description, introduced by Eliza Iturbe in 2019, is, on the one hand, the most scathing term of abuse, but on the other hand, it isn't very specific as a tag, since it is very difficult to identify something or someone that could not be labeled a "carbon form." Almost everything that exists today has in one way or another emitted CO_2, directly or indirectly, by being created or by existing, but also by being maintained. (Iturbe mentions fast food chains, roadside motels, the internet, but also Happy Meals, the James Bond film franchise, and spinach leaves, because they are, in most cases, transported, packed, delivered, sold, and, in some cases, cooked.) It is, one could argue, a consequence of the very nature of a paradigm, energetic or otherwise, as a framework within which all subsequent work is structured: it might be approached and handled flexibly, but it can never be completely abandoned in the absence of a valid and equally strong alternative. Throughout human history, there have been three paradigms of energy capture: foraging, agriculture, and carbon-intensive fossil fuels. As long as fossil fuels haven't been succeeded by a fourth paradigm, the question remains whether architects can do anything at all. Offices like Rotor and bC are part of a new kind of architectural avant-garde, just like the architects of the 1920s and 1930s, by developing experiments that should eventually become common practice. Yet Iturbe points at an important difference: "Unlike the modernists, for whom the relevant energy transition had already occurred, our energy transition is yet to come. While their present was the raw material for their proposed futures, our present is one from which we cannot build. . . . Today, the fossil economy continues to govern the production of architecture, and architecture gives form and strengthens its logic."[39] It might be better to wait for the so-called "peak oil": the moment in time when the maximum rate of global oil production is reached, after which shortages will force humanity to switch to another paradigm, to another dominant form of energy, and to cleaner ways of production. As much has been suggested, already in 2008, by Léon Krier. As a retroactive interpretation of a 1977 drawing, The 6th Order or the End of Architecture, which he made “in the shade of a magnificent tamarisk on the terrace of a fisherman’s house in the bay of Griku, on the isle of Patmos, Greece,” he wrote:

> “The end of architecture” embodied by the sixth order is . . . only a temporary historical phenomenon which will not have an important perspective beyond the “peak oil.” The fatal depletion of fossil fuels will reinstate, among other things, the existential conditions of a new traditional architecture, of a vernacular and classical tectonic, based on the efficient and aesthetic physical arrangement of natural materials: wood, stone, earth. Synthetic materials— concrete, steel, glass, plastics, artificial fibers— will inevitably return to the status of precious materials, to be used with material, intellectual, and artistic parsimony.40

Strangely, Krier seems to forget the final solution he had formulated in the late 1970s: to stop building. Instead of waiting for better conditions—for a more just society or for another energy paradigm, and preferably for both at the same time— might it not be better to suspend architecture? Isn’t there already enough architecture available to meet the spatial needs of humanity? Aren’t there enough vacant but forgotten buildings, all over the world? If the act of building is unavoidably harmful, let us then (for now) redefine architecture, no longer as the erection of new buildings, but as the rediscovery and the redevelopment of existing structures! This is— to expand the duo of bC and Rotor into an avant- garde trio— what re-sT, another Belgian office, has been promoting: “The most sustainable building is the building you don’t have to build.”41 The direct consequence of this approach is that it turns architecture into a continuous exercise in historical magnanimity: what matters is acknowledging the qualities of what exists, rather than opting for demolition and replacement. Not infrequently this comes down to the suppression of aesthetic preferences, of the personal urge to manifest oneself, or of the desire to introduce a clear break with the past. As with Rotor’s reuse and bC’s recycling, re- sT’s refitting becomes a new kind



Léon Krier, The 6th Order or The End of Architecture, drawing, 1977. Archives Léon Krier.



Atelier Kempe Thill, re-sT, Rozemaai Housing Estate, Antwerp, 2017. Photograph by Ulrich Schwarz.

of expertise— a form of consultancy to assist other architects in rediscovering spaces that have been wrongly written off, and to develop strategies for their future use. In this sense, the new task of the architect is to act as a conscience, reminding colleagues of the ecological and ethical obligation to stop building as if climate change didn't exist, while also functioning, during competitions, as a token of good will, indicating that a design team no longer needs to be convinced of that very necessity.

In its relation to the past, refitting cannot be equated with restoration or conservation, which occurs when a monument is too valuable and too precious to be used, let alone to be modified. The traditional way of dealing with the built heritage— up until the end of the twentieth century— was described by Françoise Choay in her classic book L'Allégorie du patrimoine, from 1992, as a dichotomy: on the one hand, the enlightened ideal (theorized by Viollet-le- Duc) is to restore a valuable building to a perfect state in which it has probably never been; on the other hand, the aim (theorized by John Ruskin) is to leave an old building alone, respectfully but romantically, and to let it go to ruin.[42] Refitting is more pragmatic and opportunistic, and less critical too: out of a sense of urgency, adherents of refitting no longer deem it appropriate to discern between buildings that can go and buildings that should stay, for example, because they are exceptionally beautiful or because they represent a national past or an admirable legacy. Now, nearly every existing building should be "listed" without being literally "preserved," because it should, at the same time, be open for modifications, expansions, or adaptations. Choay rightfully suggested, at the end of the previous century, that "our built heritage and the conservative practices attached to it may be construed as an allegory of man's situation at the dawn of the twenty-first century."[43] More than two decades into that century, what does the ever louder call to no longer demolish, but also to no longer build, testify to? Surely it suggests a much greater modesty and providence when it comes to "man's" interventions. And yet it can also lead to a further fossilization of cities and environments, when social changes— even when positive— can no longer manifest themselves visually, and sometimes abruptly or violently, by means of the exterior of new buildings, and with interiors responding to previously nonexisting needs.

An important precursor in the decision of architects to "make do in all circumstances" and "to start off from what exists" is the

French office Lacaton & Vassal.44 One building with which they have put their theory into practice is the seventeen- story Bois-le-Prêtre Tower, completed in 2011: the transformation of a fully occupied low- rent housing block in Paris, built in 1959, and after an unsuccessful renovation in 1990, slated for demolition since the turn of the century.45 After Lacaton & Vassal's counterproposal was accepted, each apartment, no matter its size, was extended with a winter garden and a balcony, placed as an extra double layer on top of the facade. These new spaces are vacant: they enlarge the existing housing units, but they also add a more indefinite space to a cluster of classically programmed rooms. The influence of the Bois- le- Prêtre Tower has been immense. A good example is the renovation and extension of two social housing slabs in the north of Antwerp, completed in 2019, by Atelier Kempe Thill in collaboration with re- sT.

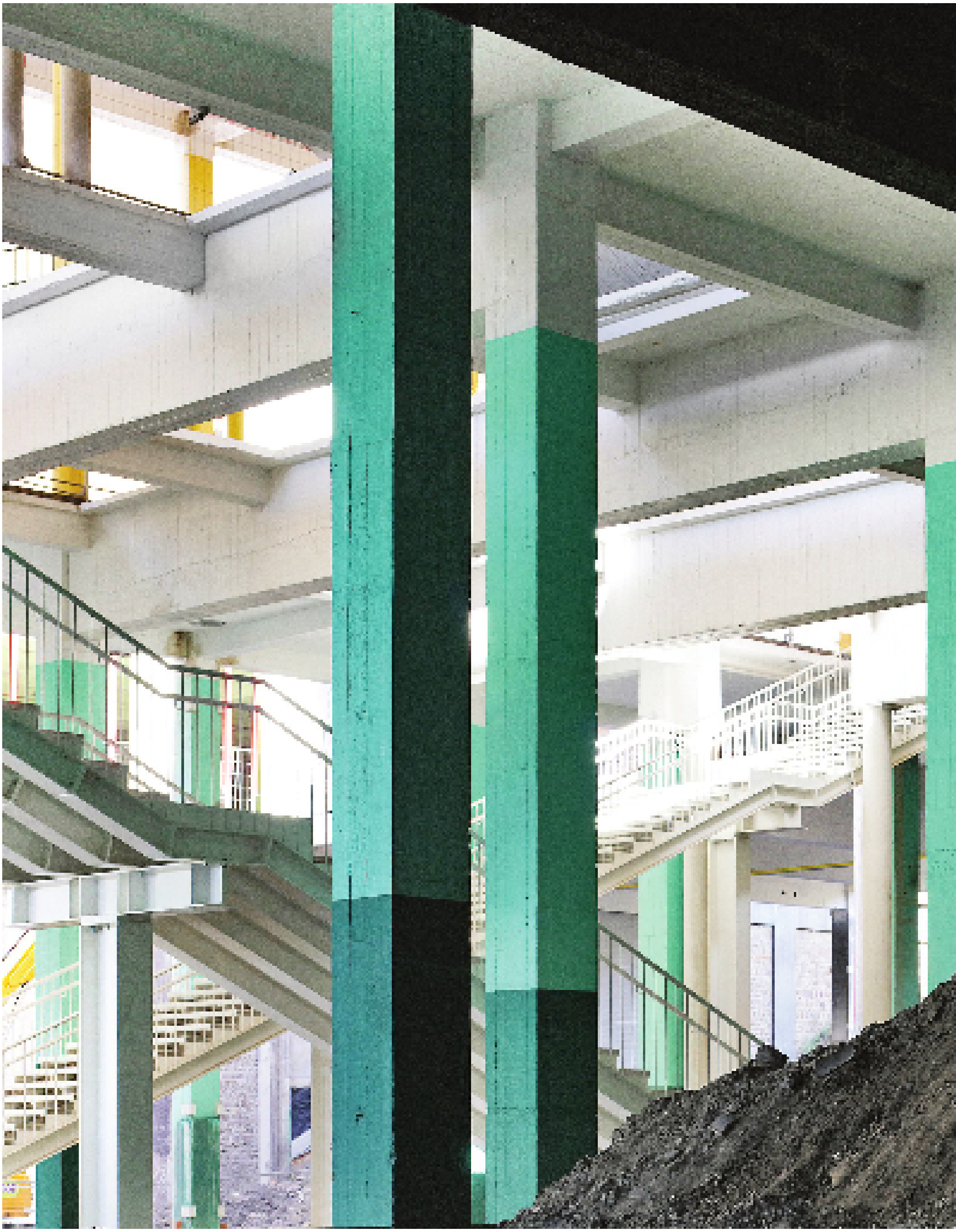
Their first decision was to not demolish these brownish brutalist buildings of eight stories, dating from the late 1970s, and equipped with uncomfortably small units. External solid stair towers along the western facade were removed, and balconies were added along the eastern facade. The vertical means of access was rearranged within the building, and the top floor was expanded; ground- floor apartments were extended toward the street. As with the Bois- le- Prêtre Tower, the presence of collective social housing is preserved and refreshed, updated as well as ameliorated but not, one could argue, expanded.

Another project by Lacaton & Vassal is an example not only of the prohibition of demolition, but also of the avoidance of unnecessary intervention— of wasting energy. Palais de Tokyo, also in Paris, is a reclamation of an art deco building from the late 1930s, opened to the public in 2002 as a "center for contemporary creation," as the institution's website has it. By the end of the twentieth century, a large part of the interior of more than 16,000 square meters was in a state of ruin, while in other parts a previous renovation project had been abandoned. Lacaton & Vassal proposed to empty all the spaces as much as possible, creating a bare- bones structure— crumbly, apparently unfinished, and slightly postapocalyptic— that became a model for art exhibitions and biennales worldwide ever since, as an alternative for the neat and clean white cube. A similar operation has been taking place since 2016 in Charleroi, where the Palais des Exhibitions, a complex of buildings of no less than 60,000 square meters, is being reorganized by a group of architects consisting of, among others, Jan De Vylder, Inge Vinck, and AgwA, the office founded by Harold Fallon and Benoît Vandenbulcke.

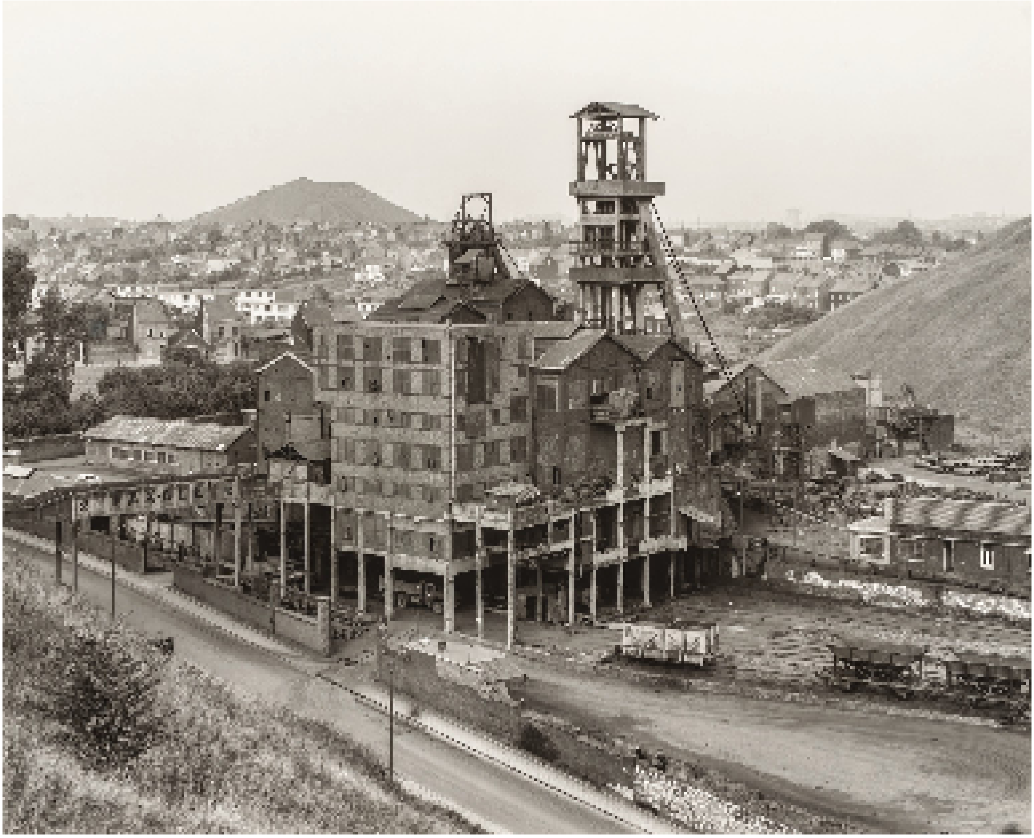
The Palais des Exhibitions was completed in 1954. With its overambitious scale, it needed to showcase the city's technical and industrial achievements, but instead it became a testimony of the final years of the flowering period of this region, when heavy industry moved away and one coal mine after another closed down. The complex's programming changed quite often in the decades since, and the former Palais des Exhibitions has offered space to a bowling alley, indoor tennis courts, the local fire brigade, and technical installations. Since 2014, the district that this building is a part of— the oldest in Charleroi— has been in the process of being revitalized, although the financial support of the European Union does not even suffice to demolish the most obsolete parts. The architects had to work with a very low budget, but also with shifting demands: in 2021, for example, the city council suddenly requested the incorporation of a new congress facility, and possibly also a concert space. To deal with that scarcity and precarity, most of the original concrete structure has been maintained as a carcass, with ribs painted white, yellow, or mint and dark green, that can be fleshed out according to possibilities and needs. Only one third of the building volume is isolated; the other areas have been opened up, and in the resulting outdoor space a parking lot can be installed or the exhibition spaces extended. In the central hall, with triple height, a new staircase connects the two wings of the former congress palace.

Chapex, as the new Palais des Exhibitions in Charleroi is called, is a colossal anthology of contemporary strategies for a society depleted of resources, money, and energy. First, it entails the refitting of a completely obsolete building, too big to be demolished. Secondly, its interiors are being refurbished— by the architects of Doorzon— with furniture that is produced entirely with reused materials that have been found in or extracted from the "source" building. And finally, it was constructed, during the 1950s, on the spurs of an enormous slagheap— a mountain of black, dusty waste that has been waiting to be recycled for more than a century, and that still seems to stream into the barely refurbished spaces. Allegorically, the project shows how we continue to live in the minimally adjusted ruins of industrial society. The landscape in and around Charleroi emblematizes that like no other territory— it is *not a coincidence that Bernd and Hilla Becher, in the final phase of their collaboration during the 1970s, made several photographs in the periphery of this city, later collected in the book Industrial Landscapes from 2002. In one of those photos, the slagheap on which the Palais des Exhibitions rests is visible in the distance, as a marker of the border between the city center and its suburbs, both, at that moment, quietly, if not catatonically, inactivated by historical change.*

The same allegorical character can be found in Belgium as a whole: for every new beginning or ending at least one precedent can be found, and nothing that occurs in our era hasn't been announced by what happened in the twentieth century. Also during the 1970s, Luc Deleu decided to lay The Last Stone of Belgium, on March 30, 1979, the first day of an exhibition of contemporary art in Horta's Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. That date was determined by the agenda of the institute (and not chosen by Deleu), but what filled the national newspaper De Standaard on that very Friday is nevertheless instructive, because it shows the historical circumstances that escorted his inverted groundbreaking: in Liège, Namur, and Charleroi, the city centers were empty following a strike against a wage freeze announced by the federal government; the new fuel bundles that had been introduced into the heart of one of the reactors of the nuclear plant of Doel were being checked one last time before being activated; the German aviation company Lufthansa ordered fifty-six airplanes from the American multinational Boeing; the aviation company Braniff advertised new direct flights, three times a week, from Brussels to the United States; the financial crisis of 1973 had since 1976 reached communist countries too, which were in 1979 trying to import Western technology and management techniques; Michael Cimino's Vietnam war drama The Deer Hunter, starring Robert De Niro and Christopher Walken, was praised as "a human epic that remains stuck in the memory with countless barbs";46 the trade deficit in the United States amounted to 1.3 billion dollars, the lowest since May 1977; British Prime Minister James Callaghan announced elections on May 3 (after which he would be succeeded by Margaret Thatcher); and this twenty- eight-page newspaper contained ads for seven different types of cars (Citroen Cx, Mazda 323, Mitsubishi Saporo, Ford Escort, Fiat 132, Datsun Cherry Europe, and Ascona Diesel) as well as for two cigarette brands (Belga and Merit).



Architecten De Vylder Vinck and AgwA, Chapex (Palais des Expositions), Charleroi, 2021. Photograph by Filip Dujardin.



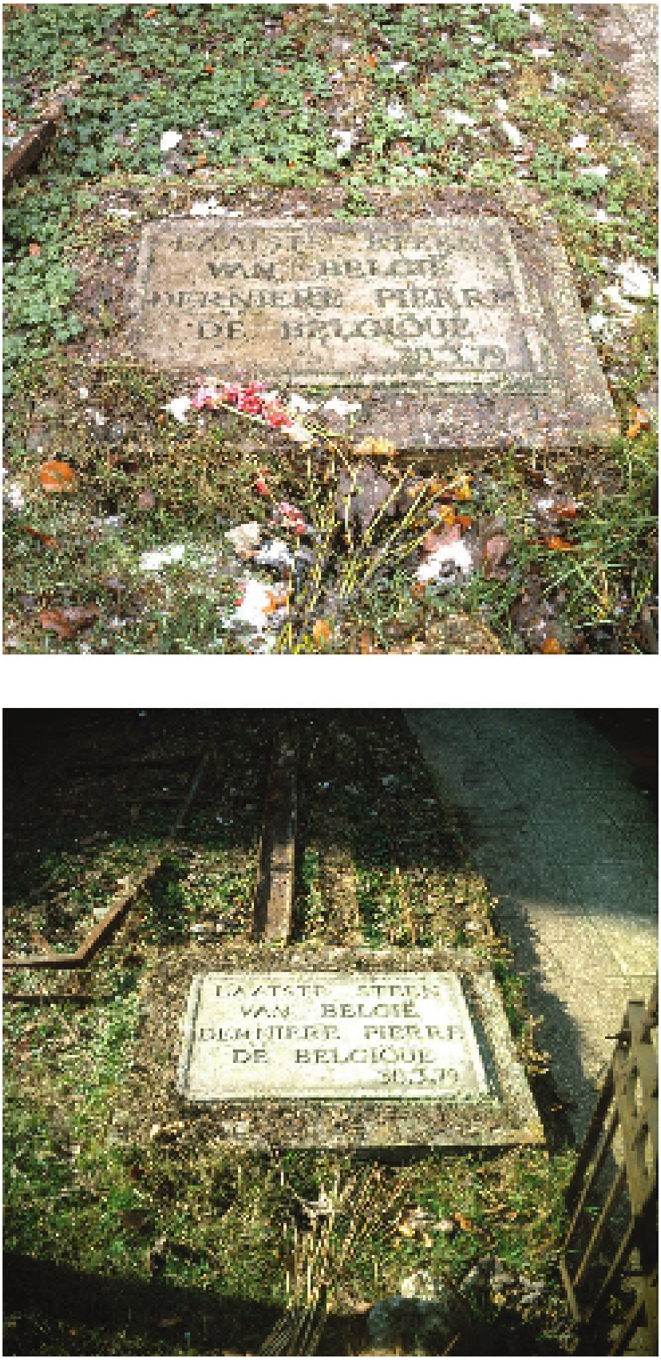
Bernd and Hilla Becher, Siège St. Théodore, Charleroi, Belgium, 1974. Stiftung Kultur, Cologne.

What Deleu was particularly reacting to with the Last Stone, on that Friday at the end of the 1970s, occurred, of course, over a longer time frame: the nearly complete fullness of the Belgian territory, while almost everything that was still being built, as if on autopilot, was in most cases inappropriate, outstripped, illusory, and unreasoned. The memorial was poured in concrete, with the curbed reinforcing steel sticking out, both comically and superfluously. In the following years, the concrete block with its bilingual inscription would be exhibited, and thus reused, at diverse occasions. One series of images shows this architectural artwork par excellence in Deleu’s front garden, photographed in what were, at the time, the still predictable and reliable conditions of the four seasons.

Many stones preceded this one, but Deleu came across a striking predecessor of the Last Stone in the early 1980s, when he photographed the meadow in the outskirts of Brussels where the remnants of Victor Horta’s Maison du Peuple, built at the end of the nineteenth century for the Socialist Party, but demolished in 1965 to be replaced by an office tower, had been lying about for more than a decade, awaiting a new destination.

Among that rubble, commemoration stones of one of the most important public buildings in the history of Belgium could be found, such as a memorial plaque for the fiftieth anniversary of the cooperative that had commissioned the Maison du Peuple. This discovery confirmed Deleu’s punishing intuition from a few years earlier: a country that demolishes a piece of architecture with such collective political and aesthetic value should indeed no longer be permitted to build. Some time later, at an outdoor exhibition in 1983, Deleu’s Last Stone was exhibited together with several remnants from the Maison du Peuple, as conflicting emblems of architecture’s alliance with the striving for a more social, just, and better society, or with irrational, libertarian progress, driven by money and technology.

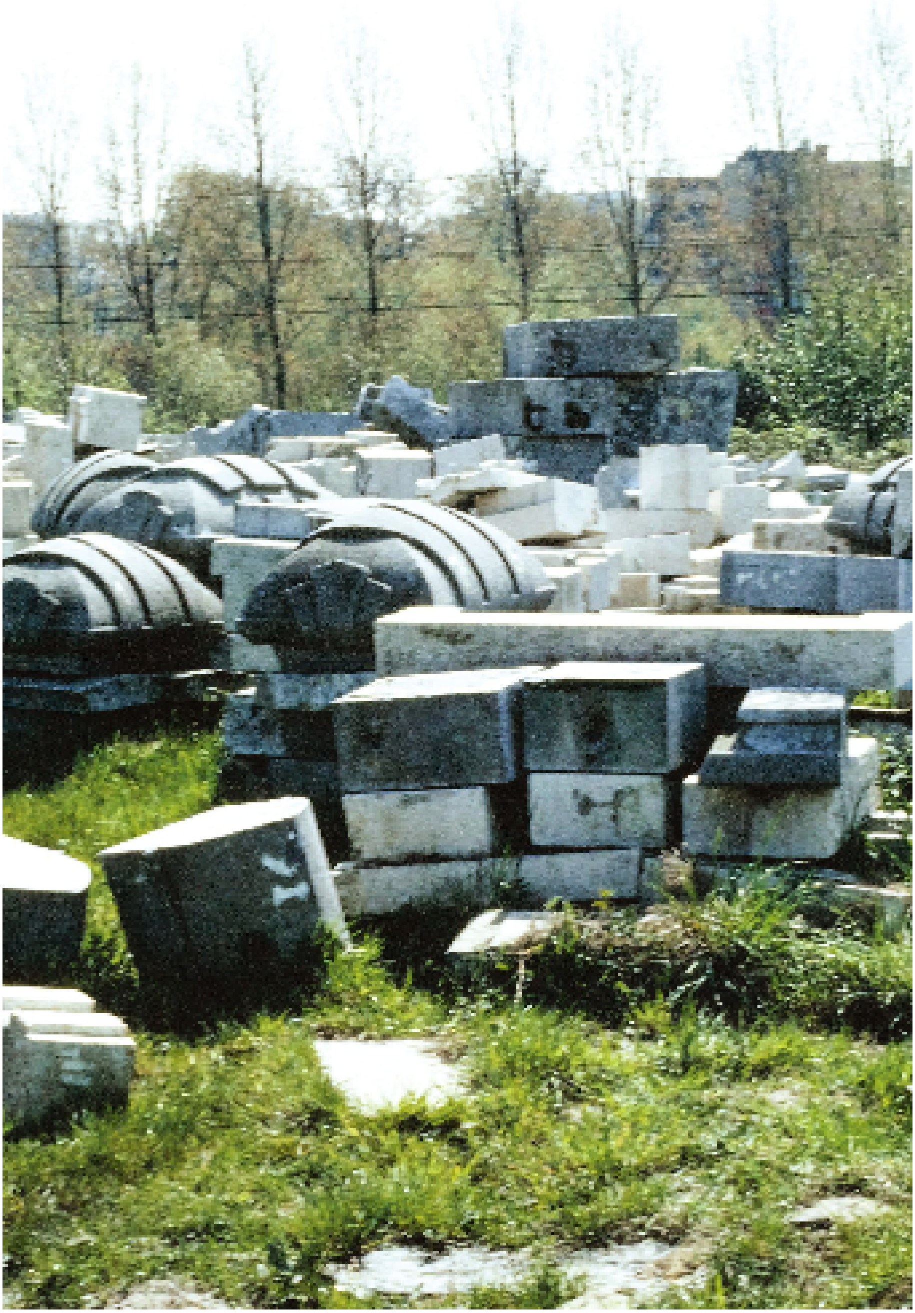
As steppingstones in the grass, they indicate how fragments of the past can be recombined to lead to the future. Beginnings and endings are always sides of the same coin—it’s this coin, no matter its currency, that is still being tossed every time we decide to stop or to continue to build.


LAATSTE STEEN
VAN BELGIË
DERNIÈRE PIERRE
DE BELGIQUE
20.3.79

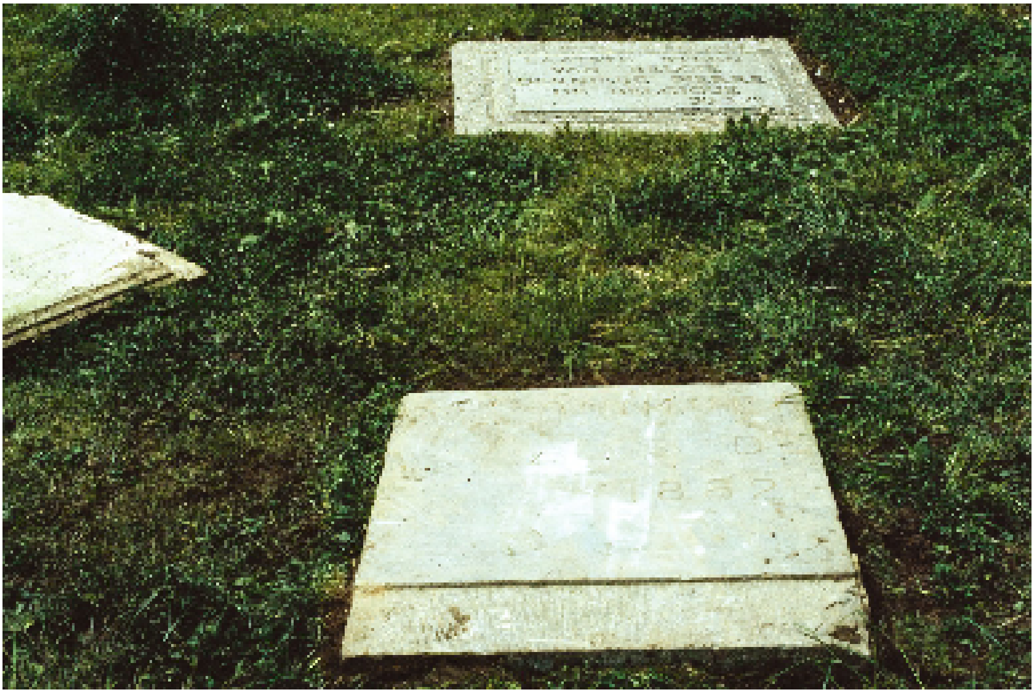
Luc Deleu/T.O.P. Office, The Last Stone of Belgium, 1979– 1980. Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.

VAN BELGIË
BELGIQUE

VAN BELGIË
PIERRE
BELGIQUE



Luc Deleu/T.O.P. Office, The Ruins of the Maison du Peuple, 1983. Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.



Luc Deleu/T.O.P. Office, The Last Stone of Belgium with memorial plaques from Horta's Maison du Peuple, Jette, 1983. Collection Vlaams Architectuurinstituut, Antwerp.

P.S.

> I don’t think I have anything special, or spatial,
> to add where my country is concerned.
> —Georges Perec1

> I believe that criticism becomes scientific from the moment when it
> includes autobiographical material, and when one is aware of this.
> — Manfredo Tafuri2

This is not a book about Belgium. It is a book about how architecture has given form to Western society since the early nineteenth century—to its choices, vices, and mistakes, but also to its achievements, perspectives, and escape routes. The premise of Something Completely Different is that Belgium is completely generic, to the point of being negligible, and wonderfully wayward, or sui generis, at the same time. Everything that this country had to reckon with during the past two centuries, most other Western nations have also had to deal with. But in Belgium, the search for meaning and comprehension, as well as for the possibility or desirability of change— the double- sided aim of cultural production— has always been characterized by ambivalence, pluralism, and discord. In her autobiographical book Factory of Facts from 1998, the Belgium-American writer Lucy Sante describes her native country as “the pressurized container for a volatile and overlapping set of oppositions.”3 This applies also, I think, to the architecture that has been devised, over the past two hundred years, for this piece of land measuring a bit more than 30,000 square kilometers. Narrating its history is, therefore, a detour to tell the story of how architects have, in different and often contradictory ways, mediated humanity’s spatial presence during successive waves of modernization.

The book’s title is borrowed from Monty Python, a group of comedians from a country from which Belgium imported a lot: its first king, its first factory, and its first train. It also refers to the double character of Belgium’s architectural history as a unique, not to say monstrously messy, account, but also as an allegory, as the expression, or at least the suggestion, of truths or generalizations about recent human existence in general. Architecture in Belgium is offered as a mirror that magnifies, distorts, and hides *differences, to the extent that they start disappearing. Of course, difference is, together with its opposite, repetition, also a very architectural notion. It might be considered as architecture's fata morgana: to produce something completely different—different from the surroundings, from predecessors, from what everybody else is doing. Yet defined in this way, it is no longer solely an architectural theme, but the key issue in a world in which it has become almost everyone's task to attract attention, paradoxically often resulting in its total loss.*

In other words, the core problem is the relationship between individual and society— the degree to which personal desires can and are allowed to manifest themselves, often to the detriment of more collective and long-term considerations. Belgium was founded in 1830, and its official history starts at that moment. The year 1830, however, was also when, according to Walter Benjamin, "the private individual makes his entrance on the stage of history."[4] While Benjamin was writing about the beginning of the reign of Louis Philippe in France, it is clear that the tension between society and individual, or between public and private, is on the one hand essential to architecture— discerning between the two is one of the activities architecture thrives on— while it is on the other hand the most important demarcation every nation, country, or society, has to cope with. The seven chapters of this book all revolve around one facet of that problem and its architectural rendering or reaction: power, suburbanization, housing, cars, chaos, culture, and society. Or described by means of seven questions: How is architecture subject to political and economic shifts? How can beauty be created in the face of the ugly consumption of land? How can people live collectively when owning a house is considered the natural thing to do? What are the architectural consequences of a commonly shared addiction to the car? Is there still room for urban planning when a territory is as disordered as a pile of confetti? What does architecture, as a discipline, mean within a culturally saturated society, and what does it try to achieve? And if that society—politically, socially, or ecologically—is stubbornly moving in the wrong direction, what compass do architects still have?

What architects have done—the projects they have made, built or unbuilt; the words they have spoken, written, or provoked— is examined and questioned to formulate a response. This book, therefore, is not an anthology or a best-of. Many of the most exceptional buildings are not featured, and some of the best Belgians *architects are absent. This is the result of a selection that was made for thematic reasons, choosing elements of an argument in my search for answers. If projects, plans, or designs are the events within this story, then the architect is the main character. Curiously (and often awkwardly) oscillating between individual agency and intellectual autonomy on the one hand, and social determination and political responsibility on the other hand, every architect is like a stand-in for each one of us, at those moments when the required stunts become too difficult. What the architect does is what we all would be doing, if we had more time, more awareness, and a different set of skills—if the division of labor were not so strict. The chapters in this book can be considered as seven essays, that—borrowing words from Theodor W. Adorno— "reflect the leisure of a childlike person who has no qualms about taking his inspiration from what others have done before."5 Those "others" are, indeed, architects. Interpreting (and evaluating, if not outright judging) what they have done is, I think, one of the best and one of the most pleasant ways to acquire knowledge, and to find out where you stand within this absurd but still miraculous thing that we call, for lack of a better alternative, the world.*

It might be weird, pretentious, and nationalist to start such a universalist undertaking by means of the architectural history of one tiny country. Exactly in this minor quality lies a way out. A small nation is, according to Milan Kundera's definition from 1984, "one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear, and it knows it."6 Kundera knew what he was talking about: at the end of 1992, his own country, Czechoslovakia, dissolved into two parts. A similar fate for Belgium— with or without the affiliation with other nations— was discussed even before the country was established. In recent years, a split has been presented as a kind of Darwinian fate. I don't know what will happen, and sometimes I don't know what I would like to happen, either. But that precariousness can contribute, I hope, to the recognizability and validity of some of the architectural stories that are being told in this book.

Acknowledgments

The reading preceding this book, as well as the writing itself, was done mainly at three different locations: the Rolex Learning Center in Lausanne; the Library of the Faculty of Architecture and Engineering at Ghent University; and the Library of Ghent University. It's unlikely that there is a better trio of places for producing a book on modern and contemporary architecture: the first building was designed by sAnAA, and completed in 2010; the second library is located in an interior reorganized by OFFICe Kersten Geers David Van Severen in 2014; and the final building, including a fabulous Tower of Books, was the final project by Henry Van de Velde, and has in recent years been restored to a better state than ever before by Robbrecht Daem Architects. I would like to thank everyone involved in the outstanding functioning of these institutions. One of the fulfillments of making this book is to deposit it in their collections, as an offering brought to the temple.

I have been writing about architecture in Belgium for twenty years now, ever since I was a student. Without the continuous encouragement from Mil De Kooning and Bart Verschaffel, I do not know who, where, or what I would have turned out to be. My thanks go out to everyone who invited me to write, in diverse ways, on architecture in or around Belgium: Geert Bekaert, Hugo Bousset, Moniek Bucquoye, Audrey Contesse, Cynthia Davidson, Sofie De Caigny, Xaveer De Geyter, Eline Dehullu, Lisa De Visscher, Stefan Devoldere, Jan De Vylder, Roeland Dudal, Stefanie Everaert, Kersten Geers, Lucas Giossi, Olivier Goethals, Christoph Grafe, Marius Grootveld, Anne Holtrop, André Kempe, Kris Kimpe, Caroline Lateur, Ulrike Lindmayr, Patrick Lynch, Yves Malysse, Manon Mollard, Véronique Patteeuw, Merel Pit, Moisés Puente, Dirk Pültau, Paul Robbrecht, Javier Agustín Rojas, Marcel Smets, Iwan Strauven, Peter Swinnen, Marina van den Bergen, Katrien Vandermarliere, Bob Van Reeth, Cyril Veillon, Richard Venlet, Kiki Verbeeck, and Adrien Verschuere.

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Notes

Chapter 1

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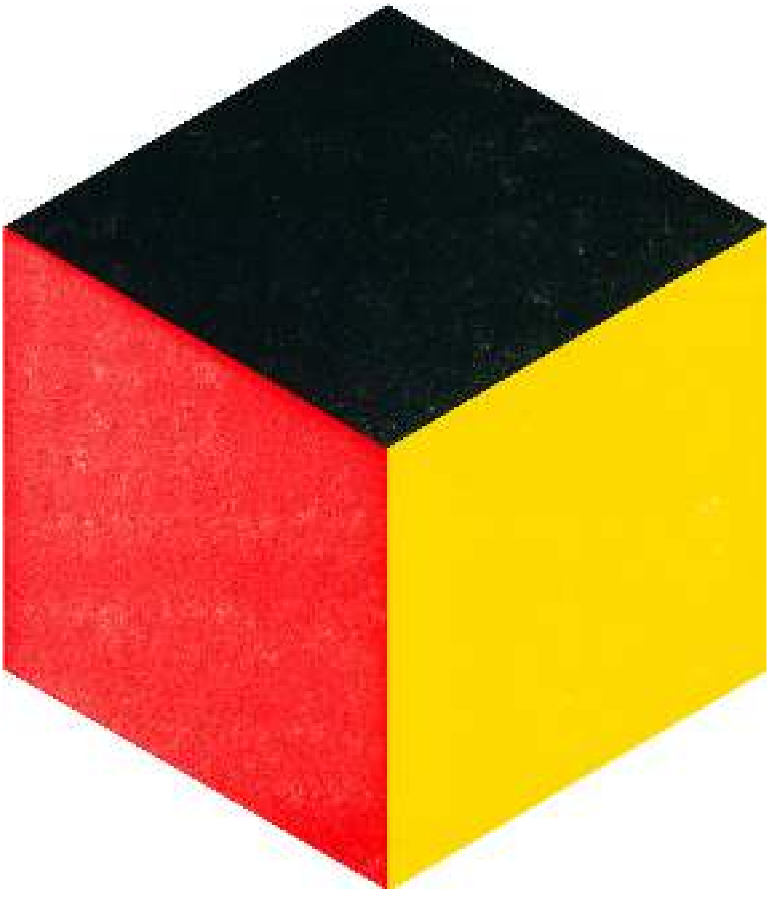10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1